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ET.

MARGARET'S ENGAGEMENT.

A Novel.

'I shall be tutored to say "Yes" in time,—
The scarecrow, Sir, was married to the maypole
In time,—but, bless me! 'twas a tedious courtship!'

H. TAYLOR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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MARGARET'S ENGAGEMENT.

CHAPTER I.

HELEN'S FIRST OFFER.

Oh, too tender, or too cruel, far, her smile upon the poor was—
For I thought it was the same smile she used to smile on *me!* *Lady Geraldine's Courtship.*

Poor little Helen was in difficulties about this time. The two young ladies of Hartsknoll had not many opportunities of testing the universal power of their charms. The society of the neighbourhood was more limited than 'county society' even generally is, by the sparseness of the gentlemen's seats round about; the long distances, and

often the bad roads between them. Much of the land adjoining the Fernleigh estates belonged to a nobleman who resided in a distant county, and rarely visited Solshire. Most of the county families spent the spring in London, and the summer at the sea-side or on the Continent, spending only a few months at their country homes. And as Sir Loys' income did not permit such expensive excursions to the ladies of his family, the few acquaintances they had, had no time or opportunity to ripen into intimacies. A periodical round of morning calls, an occasional formal dinner-party, was all the gaiety in which Mrs. Grenfell or the Fieldings had any share; though sometimes the young people would be invited to a picnic on the hills, an archery meeting, or what Aunt Flo called a 'croaking-party.'

Had Helen or Margaret been coquettes,

they must have perished from inanition for lack of their natural prey; and had they excelled in the art of flirting, their skill would have been lost for want of a proper sphere for its exercise. Margaret, indeed, was safe from temptation, as, although her engagement to Caryl was not publicly acknowledged, it was sufficiently understood to warn off all intruders on appropriated ground. But with Helen it was different. Her connection, through her step-mother, with the Fernleigh family made her intimacy with her 'cousins' seem quite a matter of course; and although they, who knew her attachment to Collingwood, and took for granted his response to it, considered that a marriage between them would certainly be arranged sooner or later, it was only common delicacy to refrain from hinting such an arrangement to 'the world,' while it was yet undecided

between the parties interested. And so, forgetting that she was yet free to be wooed and won, her friends looked on in unsuspecting indifference, while Mr. Benson, the active young curate of the palsied old rector of Hartsknoll, came twice a week to the Park to consult Aunt Flo concerning the distribution of cloaks and flannel petticoats, in winter, or walked with Helen over the hills, in summer, from that out-of-the-way cottage of old Edie Evans, where, somehow, he always chanced to be, on the days that Helen visited her. A curious coincidence, that might have been explained by the fact that the windows of his lodging at Potlid Farm commanded the hill-path that led to the lonely cottage; and that Mr. Benson possessed a field-glass.

Mr. Benson was a quiet, worthy, inoffensive young man; not one degree above

mediocrity in mind, person, or manners; but neither was he one degree *below* it. His knowledge of Scripture had not certainly been derived from his study of the Greek original, and still less of the Hebrew; nor was he in the least likely to offend the orthodox by any views of his own of the 'popular theology,' whatever theology might chance to be 'popular' in his day. But he was a well-meaning man, who tried to do his duty, to the best of his comprehension of it; and though he might not soar, he would not crawl. He knew, of course, that Miss Grenfell was an heiress; but for that fact he could not have allowed himself the luxury of falling in love with her; though he honestly believed that if the wealth had been on *his* side she would have been no less the woman of his choice.

Helen, with her pre-occupied affections,

and the consciousness that her pre-occupation was no secret to those around her, never dreamt of poor Mr. Benson's fatal ignorance of it, nor of the consequences of that ignorance. She walked with him fearless of gossiping, she talked with him on subjects of common interest relating to church and school, she played his favourite music to him, she sketched his favourite views to hang round his parlour walls, and when he took courage to tell her that he loved her with all his heart and soul; she was flattered, touched, surprised, remorseful, and *began to cry*! Then, of course, she refused him; but so gently, so falteringly, that the curate was scarcely discouraged, and rushed off to the Park to implore Mrs. Grenfell's intercession.

Aunt Flo probably designed to inform him that Helen's affections were otherwise

engaged, but, in her nervousness and sympathy, her customary rhetorical complications became so inextricably confused that she left Mr. Benson, and finally herself, under the impression that *he* was the favoured lover. This impression was immediately communicated to the rest of the family. Caryl was astonished. Collingwood was incredulous. Sir Loys was disgusted, and mildly remonstrated with his ward, who at once denied the soft impeachment. Ensued a scene of wild confusion. Mr. Benson declared himself wronged and injured, the young men pronounced him to be a conceited puppy, which he was not, and Helen fled for advice and consolation to her friend at the Manor House.

Margaret had been closely confined to the house for some days in attendance on her father, whose state of health was causing her

serious uneasiness. The doctor from Sewbery, who had been sent for, comforted her with the assurance that he was in no real danger; that quiet was all that was necessary for his restoration from a condition of nervous debility, brought on by that convenient medical scapegoat, 'the state of the atmosphere.' So Margaret had shut herself up with him, and devoted herself to the duty of soothing and amusing him, denying herself even the society of her friends at the Park, and consequently in entire ignorance of Helen's difficulties. She had left Mr. Fielding in his study, engaged in sorting some papers. He had begged her to go into the garden for some fresh air, but when she reached her own room she felt disinclined for the exertion, and sat down, instead, to enjoy fresh air at the open window.

Margaret's 'boudoir' was shut off from

the state apartments at the Manor by a landing, four or five steps, and a door. Both her dressing-room and the bedroom into which it opened looked out upon a large walled fruit-garden, whence a door in the wall led into the Coppice at the back of the house, that formed part of the woods which skirted the Fernleigh estate. She had chosen these rooms for the convenience of their opening into one another, and for the view they commanded of the wooded hills and heaths behind the house—a view more varied and extensive than that from the windows in the front.

The morning had been showery as April, but the clouds were dispersing now and scudding fast away before the brisk October breeze, and Margaret sat watching the sunlight as it chased the shadow over the hills. There creeps Shadow, slowly,—heavily,—as

shadows are wont, gliding down the mountain side,—just skimming the face of the little river—clinging darkly to the purple elders that fringe its banks. But Sunlight follows: peeping over the edge of that grove of larches, slipping swiftly down over shining gorse and golden stubble-fields. Away, away sweeps Shadow, and dives into the recesses of the glen, and hides among the grey boulders of the stone quarry. But his fleet pursuer darts after him round the silver stems of the pendulous birches; through the quivering spangles of the changing aspen boughs. So he creeps out of the gorge, and trailing the folds of his dark mantle, winds gloomily round the mountain, crowned with firs black as cypress trees.

But Sunlight has climbed there first, and is waiting for him on that bright emerald plain, green with springing wheat; and

he flashes upon weary Shadow, and rends him into a thousand morsels, wherewith he dapples river, heath, and hill. Then again he stoops, and with radiant finger-tips picks up the fragments one by one; and then he flings himself all along upon the mountain-side, with a broad smile of exulting triumph, that laughs back from woodland, valley, and stream!

'Studying, Margaret, or only dreaming?'

'Dreaming, I fancy, Helen; and your footstep was so light that it blended with my dream.'

'The door was ajar, dear, and I crept in. I knew you would be alone, and I want you so much. How is Mr. Fielding?'

'Oh, very much better; nearly himself again. Well, Helen, I am so glad to have you with me again. You will stop all day?'

'First of all, Margaret, will you go back with me to Fernleigh?'

'Impossible, dear; I can't leave papa.'

'But he goes to bed early, and then you can come, can't you? Caryl will see you safe home.'

Margaret hesitated; she was beginning to long for the faces at Fernleigh; dearer to her than she yet fully knew.

'I think I can spare an hour or two when papa has gone to bed, if you will stay with me until then. You will have to be alone here for a little while, while I give papa his tea, as he can scarcely bear visitors yet; but he won't want me until then, and he goes to bed directly after tea.'

'Agreed,' said Helen, laying aside her mantle and hat; 'now it's from pure selfishness that I want to take you with me to Fernleigh; it is by way of a peace-offering,

because they are all so angry with me about Mr. Benson.'

'Mr. Benson? Oh!' Margaret laughed. 'What have you been doing to Mr. Benson, Helen? I hear that he has been seen walking with you several times lately.'

'Oh, Margaret! You will think it so wrong of me; but indeed I never knew, I never guessed until he told me ——'

'Told you? Ah, he has spoken out, then?'

'Yes,' and Helen proceeded to give her friend the details of Mr. Benson's 'proposal,' adding, 'And then, dear, I was so sorry for him. When he talked of long-cherished hopes, I felt as if I really could not bring myself to inflict on him such disappointment.'

She stopped.

'But,' said Margaret with surprise, 'you

don't mean to say that you have accepted him?'

'Oh no, of course not. I don't know what I *did* say, but I know he asked me if there was any prior engagement, and you know I could not say there was, and then he said he would yet hope; and, poor fellow, he looked so piteous. I was so sorry for him, but I intended him to understand that I could never marry him, whether he understood it or not.'

'I should not wonder if he did not understand it,' said Margaret, laughing, 'if you expressed your resolution as obscurely as you tell your story; and he did *not* understand it, then?'

'Well, no; he came to the Park, and spoke to mamma, and she felt for him as much as I did, and he asked her if *she* would raise any obstacle to his wishes, and

she said "No," because she did not know what to say, nor what I had said to him, and then he went to Sir Loys.'

'At all events he was straightforward.'

'Oh yes; he is really a good man, dear. Well, when he was gone, Sir Loys sent for me and asked me why I had not placed sufficient confidence in him or mamma to allow them to guess, at least, in what direction my heart had pointed. He said that he had told Mr. Benson that my choice was free; that he would never throw any difficulty in my way.'

'That was generous of Sir Loys, for I am sure it must have been a disappointment to him to find that your inclination had taken a direction so different from what we all believed.'

'Why, Margaret! you are as bad as all the rest. I told you just now I told Sir

Loys that it was all a mistake, that I had no inclination at all for Mr. Benson, and no wish to marry him. And then Sir Loys wrote to Mr. Benson, and then *he* wrote to me.'

'Oh mercy! Helen, what a confused story! it makes my head whirl; if you didn't want to have the man, why could you not refuse him point-blank, without all this fuss?'

'Because I had not the courage to give him pain. But here is his letter; I want you to tell me how I am to answer it.' Therewith she handed to Miss Fielding what was unquestionably her first love-letter, or rather, her first lover's letter, for it was rather reproachful than amatory.

Mr. Benson complained, not without reason, of the false position in which he had been placed by her ambiguous reception of

his addresses, and while still clinging to the hope she had encouraged, he asked for a direct sanction or withdrawal of that hope; in short, for a plain 'yes' or 'no.' The letter was written with manly simplicity and tenderness, and Margaret felt a respect for the writer, and secretly thought that *she* should have been very much ashamed if any weakness of *hers* had called forth such a reproach in any letter addressed to *her*. Helen watched her anxiously as she read it, and then said:

'What am I to say to him, Margaret? I am sure I don't deserve that he should be so fond of me, and I can't tell him, can I? that I love Collingwood, because Collingwood has never asked me for my love.'

'I see no necessity for telling him that, —it is enough that you do not care for *him*.'

'But I do care very much for him, only I would rather marry Colin.'

'But as you say Colin has never asked you to marry him — perhaps he never will.'

'Oh yes, he will; mamma says he will; I have full faith in him!'

'But if he did not?—if you were *sure* that he never would, could you marry Mr. Benson *then*?'

Helen hesitated, but she was severely truthful.

'Some time I think I could—it is so pleasant to feel oneself beloved; but I would rather wait *years* for Collingwood.'

'It is plain,' said Margaret with a little contempt, 'that you cannot ask Mr. Benson to wait until Collingwood makes up his mind whether to take or leave you; but if you are in a hurry to be married, and feel such diffi-

culty in refusing Mr. Benson, I would advise you to take him and be done with it.'

Poor Helen's eyes filled with tears.

'You are very unkind, Margaret; I am in no hurry to be married; I tell you I would wait years and years for Collingwood; I have been fond of him ever since I was a little girl; but I don't think any woman should despise another because she cannot look lightly on a good and honourable man's love.'

'Good and honourable,'—repeated Miss Fielding, and sighed. 'Well Helen, if you have so much esteem for Mr. Benson why not content yourself with such a foundation for married happiness, and sacrifice your childish fancy for Colin?'

But Helen buried her face in her friend's bosom, and whispered:

'I cannot—I *passionately* love Colin.'

Again Margaret's pretty lip curled dis-

dainfully ; but this time Miss Grenfell did not see it.

'At least you must admit Mr. Benson's right to insist on a clear understanding. If *you* are willing to await Collingwood's decision it is not to be expected that *he* will be.'

I don't wish him to wait,' answered Helen a little resentfully, for she was piqued at last by the sarcasm in Margaret's voice. 'I shall write to him to-night by this very post, and tell him he must think of me no more.'

'By this post? why where is he?'

'He is gone home, to his friends at Lynton.'

'You must be quick then, for the post goes out in an hour.'

'You said you wanted to give Mr. Fielding his tea; leave me your desk, and I can write my letter while you are with your father.'

With this suggestion Margaret complied, and went down to her father's study.

He felt much better, he told her, but he had tired himself with poring so long over old cramped writings, and he would go to bed. He should sleep more comfortably, he was sure, when he knew that she was enjoying herself with her friends at the Park, instead of moping by herself in her lonely rooms. He wished her to go back with Miss Grenfell in the little pony-carriage. Mr. Fernleigh would drive her home. The evenings were very warm for the season, but the close carriage should be sent for her if she was afraid of cold? No! Margaret had no fear of cold, so she bade her father good night and returned to Helen. That young lady was sealing her letter when Miss Fielding entered. She gave it to her to put into the post-bag, but offered no information re-

specting its contents. She was a little offended with her friend; but Miss Fielding's remonstrance had had the good effect of imparting to the tone of her letter a firmness which precluded the possibility of any further misunderstanding. She could not be otherwise than gentle and tender, but she gave poor Mr. Benson his quietus, for all that. Before they arrived at Fernleigh the placable little maiden had forgotten her brief displeasure; but I am sorry to say that Margaret, in her secret mind, felt something very like contempt for what she considered her weak pity for the curate, and her weaker preference for Collingwood.

CHAPTER II.

THE CORD IS FRAYED.

It is the little rift within the lute
That, by and by, will make the music mute
And ever widening, slowly silence all. TENNYSON.

MARGARET was received with acclamation by the party at the Park, which had been joined, shortly before her arrival, by the little Fairy Queen. Collingwood had escorted his god-mother from the cottage like a faithful squire, followed by the Gorgon, carrying the indispensable coiffure. Mabel used always to complain that among the most trying infirmities of advanced life must be reckoned

caps and spectacles, though as yet she had no need of the latter 'aids to reflection;' and the graceful veil that hung over her silver braids could scarcely be called a 'cap.' When the family group had assembled for the evening in the drawing-room, a stranger looking in upon them would have thought they all looked very contented and happy; but he would not have detected any lovers among them, for Caryl Fernleigh was not one of those who withdraw themselves from the domestic circle with their beloved, into the seclusion of remote corners, or into the shadow of window-curtains, there to murmur and coo, before sympathising, envious, or scandalised spectators; nor would Margaret have consented to such an isolation if he had wished it. Collingwood said that Caryl did not know how to make love. Perhaps he did not. It would even seem that he did not,

if the measure of his success was to be the measure of his skill. But the end was not come yet; and I incline to think that had he been more impetuous, he would have found his lady still more cold.

'What's the odds (say the *gamins*) so long as you're 'appy?' Then there were no odds for either to-night; for Caryl was ineffably happy, at the unwonted graciousness of his proud mistress in coming so unexpectedly, so almost unsolicited, to brighten his home with her smile. He had not seen her for three long days. Although he had called every day to enquire for Mr. Fielding, he had only received courteous messages in reply, and he was too timid or too delicate to claim any privilege that she seemed inclined to withhold. Even now he scarcely ventured to approach her, though not a word, not a gesture of hers, escaped him. The very air was

musical with her voice and fragrant with her breath; the commonest objects on which her bright eyes rested, received a consecration from the glance, and were thenceforth to him for ever beautiful and holy.

And Margaret knew that so it was. She knew that the glow on Caryl's handsome features, the softness in his always melodious voice, was *for her* only, though he neither spoke to nor looked at her. She felt that, as Helen had said, it was pleasant to be beloved, and for this once she gave herself up to the enjoyment, and tried to forget Willoughby and Meredith. She did not see her inconsistency in despising Helen for having been so touched by the affection of a good and honourable man, while she thus basked in the sense of feeling herself worshipped by one whose honour and worth she permitted herself to doubt. Ah, Margaret! you have

fought obstinately, yet you are yielding; inch by inch you are nearing the great landslip beneath which roll the torrents of passion that few can stem—a torrent that drifts some to dark abysses of crime and sorrow, that floats others to the tranquil river of wedded faith, flowing calmly onward to the Eternal Sea.

She sat at one end of the room, playing chess with Sir Loys; at the other end, Caryl and Aunt Flo were bending over a table on which was spread a sort of plan, coloured green, with dabs of crimson and white and yellow on it, which to the uninitiated might seem to represent the map of an estate, or of a racing-ground, or anything else that it was not. Helen, who was an accomplished musician, sat at the piano practising an air she had composed for one of Collingwood's songs, and the poet stood over her, listening

with an interest which, to tell truth, was as much for the song as for the singer; and yet his interest in her was greater than any he had yet shown. Hitherto he had been quite careless of her rather too open attachment for him, as of a prize which could be his whenever he chose to take it, and could wait his leisure. But since another man had attempted to appropriate it it had assumed a greater value in his eyes, and Helen's seeming hesitation respecting the curate's offer had aroused in him a feeling that could almost be mistaken for jealousy. The most consummate coquette could not have adopted a likelier method of fixing his variable inclination; but Helen was entirely guiltless of such design, and unconscious of her imminent triumph. So she sat innocently warbling her idol's lyric, while he alternately blamed and commended; and

Miss Marston sat by, laughing at them both.

'Will that do, Colin?'

'Not too well, I think; that music hardly does full justice to the words.'

'I think *no* musical accompaniment would. A lyric like that is complete in the music of its own rhythm and cadence; it should be recited, not sung.'

'Exactly; in an ordinary ballad, so that the air and the sentiment are in harmony, the words may jingle or jar as you will—"Home, sweet home," for instance.'

'The fact is, Colin,' interposed Queen Mab, 'you know nothing about music; the noises you make when you fancy you are singing, are as tuneless as the solo of a frog! On such occasions you improve upon Mendelssohn's "Song without *words*," for it is a song without *music* as well.'

'Oh, Mabel! (from Helen) how rude you are!'

'Rude?' said Colin, 'not at all; I consider that she is complimentary. I profess to be a poet, and true poets know nothing of the music of crotchets and quavers; believe me, the symphonies of heaven are not tuned to harps or harmoniums.'

'The specimens you have lately given of your art,' remarked Mabel dryly, 'scarcely prove you qualified to speak so confidently of heavenly symphonies. The "Holy, holy, holy" is as yet no note of *yours*.'

Helen hastened to change the conversation.

'Look, Collingwood,' she cried, 'do see how absorbed mamma is in her discussion with Caryl.'

'She must be match-making!' said Colin, with a mischievous glance at Mabel; 'no-

thing else can be of such interest to a woman.'

'She *is* match-making,' said Mabel; 'only listen, and you will hear.'

Helen began to laugh.

'But what is that map they are bending over?'

'That? oh, that's the field of action—perhaps the new croquet-lawn your aunt talks of making.'

Colin looked at the pair with curiosity, while Mabel and Helen exchanged amused glances. Caryl was speaking.

'Shall we have Mrs. Elliott?'

'Well, no. She has rather lost character lately. She misbehaved at the Crystal Palace last year.'

'Queer place to misbehave in,' murmured Collingwood, while Helen and Mabel shook with suppressed laughter.

'Will Celine Forestier do?'

'She's too old.'

'Kate Hausberg then? she only came out last year.'

'Kate is too high-coloured; we must have something more delicate to match with Rev. H. Dombrain.'

'Who the deuce is he?' whispered Colin, 'and where did they pick up all those foreigners?' Mabel only shook her head.

'Well, then, Lady Rivers? a very fine form?'

'Not the form *I* like,' replied Caryl, with the gusto of a connoisseur. *She's quite too flat!*'

Collingwood lifted his eyebrows, and stared at his brother in dumb amazement. Mabel and Helen were past speaking.

'It is difficult to choose,' said Mrs. Grenfell, plaintively; 'so many beauties, and

none of them such good matches as we want! Mrs. Bosanquet is sweet, but shy with *us*; and Mrs. William Paul is coarse, though she is very rich.'

'They've come to the rich widows now,' said Colin.

'Stay!' cried Caryl, eagerly. 'You've written for John Hopper? Well, Louise Odier will be just the match for him; she's not old,—refined, constant'—('Come!' said Collingwood, 'I'm glad they have found a decent girl at last'), 'and (continued Caryl), SHE'S VERY PROLIFIC!!'

Colin was regularly taken aback, and could only gasp out—'the deuce she is!'

But when Aunt Flo objected.

'But John Hopper is not robust, and Louise has such a sprawling habit; SHE WOULD TAKE UP ALL THE BED!!' he could only feebly ejaculate, 'Oh, Lord!' Where-

upon Mabel and Helen set up such a duet of shrieking laughter, that Caryl looked up amused, and Mrs. Grenfell said innocently:

'Are you laughing at me, you two? I assure you it is no easy matter to make a selection from some hundred varieties of roses.'

At that moment Sir Loys got up and rang the bell for coals. Margaret began to put the chessmen into their box, and the operation being, I suppose, difficult and complicated, Mr. Fernleigh went to her assistance. Sir Loys discreetly withdrew from that end of the room, and was entering into conversation with Miss Marston when the footman appeared, bearing some large logs of wood, with which he was approaching the hearth, when Aunt Flo suddenly exclaimed:

'Thomas, are you ill? Look at him, he's as white as a whiting!'

All eyes immediately turned on the man,

who certainly did look as pale as death, and in his nervous confusion he deposited a log of wood in Aunt Flo's lap, instead of in the wood box, while she, still staring at him, nursed it absently, as if it had been a doll or a baby, as he faltered out:

'It's the ghost, ma'am, it has scared us a'most to fits.'

'The ghost again!' cried Collingwood.

'It's not in the house, is it?' said Sir Loys.

Margaret dropped the chessmen on the carpet, and glanced keenly at Caryl, but apparently he was not afraid of ghosts, for as he stooped to pick up the chessmen, she thought she saw him smile.

'In the house, sir?' answered Thomas, 'the Lord forbid! But I saw it myself, with my own eyes, not half an hour ago in the wood.'

'What were you doing in the wood?'

'I just stepped out for a minute, sir, to take a message to Meredith, from Mrs. Probert—to Meredith's wife, I mean; and—Oh Lord! Mr. Collingwood!'

This abrupt apostrophe to Collingwood was called forth by the extraordinary grimaces that young gentleman was making at the speaker, with a view of arresting the impending communication; but to the excited nerves of the terrified ghost-seer his contortions had something horrible and supernatural. Queen Mab interposed.

'Don't make such frightful faces, Colin; you are more hideous than any spectre. Go on, Thomas, tell us all about it.'

'As I was coming home, ma'am, between the Manor House grounds and the Old Chase it passed me close by; I could have touched it.'

'No, you couldn't, not if it was a real ghost; but I suppose it was just some poaching fellow.'

'No, Miss Marston, it was the poor dead gentleman; he passed me, moving his hands, so; and I heard him say in a thick voice: "Willoughby! lost Willoughby."'

'Come,' said Collingwood, 'that's a tidy sort of ghost, to call out his own name, lest he might be mistaken for any one else's. What had he got on, Thomas?—though I don't see what business a ghost has to have anything on. If he's out of his body he ought to be out of his clothes too, I should say.'

'He'd got on something long and whitish, Mr. Collingwood, and a wide-awake hat. I think ——'

'He was too wide-awake without that! I doubt that spectre has got quite a spectral

wardrobe; the last time I heard of him he was dressed in a shroud and a Glengarry.'

'I tell you what,' said Sir Loys angrily; 'this is quite beyond a joke; some measures must be taken to put a stop to such folly. Thomas, if you had had anything of the man in you, you would have knocked the fellow down. Leave the room, and let me hear no more of such nonsense.'

The man obeyed, and for a moment a dead silence fell upon the assembly; a silence which was broken by Aunt Flo saying piteously:

'However did this big log get into my lap? Take it away, somebody.'

'I should just like,' said Collingwood, relieving his aunt of her burthen, and flinging it on the fire with a vehemence that sent it rebounding into the fender—I 'should just like to take my gun into the wood one fine

night, and pepper that fellow, whoever he is, till he'd be glad to keep his bed for awhile!'

'Do!' cried Margaret, speaking for the first time; 'and I will go with you—Caryl and I, and Miss Marston; we'll make up a party, and go spirit-hunting in the wood!'

An expression of disgust flitted over Caryl's face, but he said not a word. Sir Loys was shocked.

'My dear Margaret,' he said, 'really, excuse me, I don't think that proposal quite —eh?—quite ladylike; but of course you are only joking?'

'Of course,' said Caryl in a low voice, but with unmistakable bitterness; 'the subject is one on which it specially becomes Miss Fielding to joke.'

'I am not joking,' answered Margaret; 'if Colin will go and shoot at the ghost I will

go with him; but,' turning to Caryl, 'I will not press *you* to go, if you are afraid.'

But her lover answered calmly:

'Certainly I will go, if you wish it; but I should be sorry that you should take such a whim as that.'

Sir Loys once more interfered.

'It is a mere vulgar freak of some low fellow, who wants to frighten the servant-maids. Margaret, my love, it is unbecoming a young lady to mix herself up in such an unfeeling frolic.'

But Sir Loys expostulated vainly.

'You think I should be frightened?' said Miss Fielding. 'If these gentlemen will not accompany me I will go alone; "I dare do all that may become a man."'

'Finish the quotation, madam,' sneered Collingwood, it will be more appropriate: "Who dares do more is none," for only

women dare do more than becomes a man, and a great deal more than becomes *them*, occasionally.'

'Suppose,' said Mabel, 'that we adjourn this debate? Look at Helen, she is quite pale. Florence, you must give me a bed to-night. If practical joking is going on in the wood, I for one don't choose to make sport for rustics in white sheets. Loys, I want some supper. I hear the pony-chaise coming round for Margaret. If I were you, Caryl, I would leave such a valiant damsel to drive herself home.'

But when Margaret made her adieu, the Fairy Queen drew closer to her, and whispered:

'Take care, my child! your captive is straining in the leash; the *cord is frayed*, and once lost, lost for ever!'

CHAPTER III.

A NON SEQUITUR.

We who have clipt
The curls before our eyes, may see at least
As plain as men do. AURORA LEIGH.

HAD Miss Marston's story, then, done Margaret no good? Did any one's story ever do *you* any good? Or does any one ever derive *direct* benefit from the teaching of another's experience? God forbid that I should imply that no benefit is derived from such teaching, for then, what numbers must have sorrowed and suffered in vain! No, as in the meadows of the Nile, the

precious grain, gathered in the sweat of the reapers' brows, is flung upon the swollen tides of life, and the currents of youthful interests and impulse sweep impetuously onward, and the careless eye deems it lost and wasted. But wait. Those tides will ebb, those waters subside, and the seed, slowly germinating beneath them will spring up in vigour and fruitfulness, though not, it may be, until after many days—until they who reaped and they who sowed it, have long gathered their own final harvests. But, indeed, the moral of Mabel's story bore no reference to Margaret's state of feeling, and so failed in its application. The physician had mistaken her diagnosis, and her prescription did not touch the disease.

About a week after the evening she had spent at the Park she drove, with Mrs. and Miss Grenfell, to pay some morning calls in

the neighbourhood, Mr. Fielding being pronounced convalescent. She did not return until late, and on enquiring for her father, the butler told her that he had gone out, leaving word that he should probably be back in time for dinner, but that if Miss Fielding had 'company' with her, she was not to wait for him. But Miss Fielding not having 'company,' chose to wait; and dinner had been kept back half an hour when her father came in.

'My love,' he said, a little peevishly, 'why did you disregard my message to you that you were not to wait for me? It is a questionable compliment that implies that an unpunctual guest would rather see the dinner spoiled for everybody than only for himself; quite a mistaken courtesy, Margaret, I assure you.'

'But I did not want my dinner, papa; I don't care to dine alone.'

'And why are you alone? Did not Caryl Fernleigh accompany you back from the Park?'

'Yes, he walked home with me through the Old Chase, but he left me at the wicket-gate.'

'I am very much disappointed at not finding him here; I have seen so little of him lately. He is the only one of the family whose society I care for; Sir Loys is so quiet, and Collingwood is so restless and noisy; but it is always a pleasure to me to see Caryl.'

No more was said then. Mr. Fielding went upstairs to dress, and after a hasty toilette joined his daughter at the dinner-table; but she saw with anxiety that he sent away every dish untasted, and that his manner was fretful and irritable. She thought, too, that there was a despondency

in his attitude when the servants had left them together, and he sat moodily playing with his wine-glass. Surely he was changed! His hair used not to be so grey, nor his cheeks so hollow.

He glanced up suddenly, and, meeting her eyes fixed upon him, shifted his position uneasily, but did not speak. Then Margaret said, a little abruptly:

'Papa, Caryl and I quarrelled this afternoon, because I pressed him to watch with me in the Beech Coppice for what they call Willoughby Evans' ghost.'

Mr. Fielding bent down to examine little Frisk's collar, who was lying on the hearth-rug at his feet. He made no remark, however, so Margaret continued:

'Why should Caryl be so annoyed with me for urging this vigil upon him, since I offer to share it?'

'Did you make that proposal in good faith, or only to annoy your lover?'

'In perfect good faith. I have an impression that in this mystery of Evans' apparition may be found a key to the secret of his assassination.'

'What can it matter? The poor fellow is dead, and there's an end. It can do no good to stir up the business again.'

'It matters *to me*.'

Margaret said this so significantly that her father raised his head and looked full in her face. She replied to the look, though she faltered slightly:

'Have you forgotten Meredith's story? *I* have not; I never can.'

'Folly! Caryl no more killed Willoughby than—*I* did; he can't kill a partridge, much less a man.'

'He killed Meredith's eldest son.'

'Accidentally, if he did at all.'

'This other might have been accidental too.'

'Be it so; it is no affair of yours or mine.'

'It may be an affair of *yours*. Dear papa, how you start! You are fretting yourself into a nervous fever about that horrid portfolio of Mr. Morton's. If Caryl really knows what has become of it ——'

Mr. Fielding looked surprised.

'Is that your motive for this enquiry, Margaret? Then, for heaven's sake, let it drop. You will do me no good by your meddling. I am surprised that you can cherish such a suspicion of the man who is to be your husband. You have *no heart*.'

Margaret was deeply wounded by this accusation from her father. From *him*, at least, she had had no reserves. He knew all the grounds of the suspicion he so severely

condemned; he knew, or might have known, that she had struggled for months—they looked like years—against the feminine weakness that would have blinded the clear perceptions of her reason, perverted the right decisions of her judgment. He knew—he must have known—that the struggle was growing daily harder, the possible result more painful and terrible. And he spoke as if it cost her nothing! He accused her of having *no heart*! A year ago that possession was, as it were, in abeyance; she hardly knew, or cared to know, whether she had it or not. But now, ah! she had learnt, as many of us do, the importance of a heart by its aching!

She sat silently revolving these meditations in her mind, blaming her hard destiny that had given her, she thought, affections too warm or judgment too clear sighted. How

she had despised the loving facility with which so many women accept the most inconsistent hypotheses in favour of their idol's perfections. *Now* she envied even the blindness of such worship as Helen's for Collingwood. She was in the frame of mind in which an enquirer, torn with doubts he cannot silence, with questionings he cannot answer, is tempted in discouragement to abandon the too painful search for truth, and take refuge from all his fears and strivings in the bosom of a church's infallibility, as the ostrich, when her pursuers gain upon her, will bury her head in the sand. Marriage with Caryl Fernleigh, in Margaret's present state of feeling would be what the sand is to the fleeing ostrich, what the authority of Rome is to the weary sceptic. But what of the bird when her pursuers come up with her? What of the sceptic when his doubts return?

Mr. Fielding broke silence.

'You are very brave, Margaret,' he said, with a strange smile; 'few ladies would volunteer to keep night-watch near the scene of a recent murder, even in their lovers' company. But men seldom like to see a lady taking the initiative in such enquiries. I am not surprised that Mr. Fernleigh should have declined the agreeable promenade you proposed to him.'

'But he did not decline. He said that my persistence in harping upon a subject which was so distasteful to him proved either that I totally disregarded his feelings or that it had for me a singular, and he thought a most unnatural, fascination.'

'I do not see that he could draw any other inference.'

Mr. Fielding's tone of dry reproof was new to his daughter's ears. She glanced up at

him, and was again struck by his harassed weary expression. Yes, he was certainly changed; he had left the doctor's hands too soon. She would consult Miss Marston about it to-morrow. And, making a memorandum to this effect on her mind's tablets, she resumed her narration.

'He was very severe, papa. I never saw him so angry. I do not understand why he should feel so irritated at my reasonable curiosity, if you choose to call it so.'

'How did he express so much irritation?'

'Oh, more in manner than in words, though they were bitter, too. He said, that if I insisted upon his accompanying me on such a quest, I should be obeyed as a matter-of-course, but that he should find it easier to convince me of the non-existence of the pretended apparition than *I* should find it to convince *him* of the reality of a friend-

ship that could so disregard his feelings and wishes.'

'A significant warning, and I advise you to profit by it. Moreover, the sacrifice would be a fruitless one. You would see no ghost. I and Meredith have already watched vainly for it three nights in succession.'

'You, papa! you! No wonder you look so ill! In your delicate health to be out all night in the cold, it might have killed you. Meredith ought to have prevented you from committing such an imprudence.'

'He was very unwilling to go with me, I assure you, my dear. He has the dread of the supernatural, common to men of his class. But his terrors are dissipated for the present, at all events. He is firmly persuaded that the spectre that haunts the Beech Coppice is a white owl, and nothing else.'

'But it has made you ill; now has it not?'

'Has what made me ill?—the owl?'

'Oh, don't laugh, it is no laughing matter; you look wretchedly ill.'

'Do I? Well, I'll make up for my ghostly vigils by going to roost with the birds for a week to come, for indeed I am rather tired!'

Margaret watched him for a moment as he lay back wearily in his chair, with his eyes closed; then she rose softly, and going up to him, knelt down by his side and whispered:

'Father dear! for *my* sake, do take more care of yourself; you are *everything* to me.'

Mr. Fielding smiled, and passed his hand caressingly over the soft bright hair. It was very rarely that Margaret unbent so, and never but to *him*.

If Caryl could have seen her *then*, with

that grace of feminine tenderness, the absence of which he had often *felt*, though scarcely even to himself acknowledged—if he could have heard her clear voice falter, seen her bright eyes soften with those 'tender tears of womanhood,' he would have sallied out to hunt up all the spectres in the churchyard as gladly as a sheep-dog collects a flock of sheep; and driven them, if she so willed it, to her feet. But alas! he did not see her then, and the gentle mood passed away as soon as Mr. Fielding had returned to his chamber; and Margaret sat sipping her tea alone in her dressing-room.

It is almost unnecessary to say that she had no faith in, and no fear of, the spectral apparition, although she had chosen to feign belief in it, to try her lover, in the idea that though her closest scrutiny had failed

to elicit any confirmation of Meredith's accusation, his not unnatural reserve might break down before supernatural terrors. At all events, this was the last test in her power to apply, and she was resolved to apply it at any risk. What this ghost story really signified she cared not to guess at. Some trick of the servants, possibly, to frighten one another; or some ruse of the poachers to scare the gamekeepers, which from fear or respect they had refrained from practising when Mr. Fielding was Meredith's companion. The same motive might deter them from practising it on her, but ghost or no ghost, stronger nerves than those of the imaginative and impressible Caryl would give way under the consciousness of guilt, when brought to the very scene of its commission, on its very anniversary. For yes, tomorrow would be the anniversary of that

shocking event. If he could keep silence among such associations he *must* be innocent! Collingwood would have called this conclusion a *non sequitur*, but Margaret herself was perfectly satisfied with her inconclusive logic; and as she had only herself to convince, it was enough that it answered the purpose as well as the closest reasoning could have done. Better, perhaps, if the reasoning had been on the opposite side.

CHAPTER IV.

ROBERT BROWNING'S BROTH.

Oh ho! quoth my friend, he'll come on in a trice,
He's keeping a corner for something that's nice!
GOLDSMITH.

MABEL MARSTON had something of the appearance of a pleasant-looking witch brewing a love potion, as she knelt before the fire in her little parlour, watching a saucepan in which simmered a mysterious compound, that had the odour of some kind of stew. Her familiar, the Persian cat, lay on his cushion beside her, observing her proceedings with a languid interest betokening low spirits

or failing appetite. At the door stood Georgie, in a hostile and indignant attitude, such as she always assumed when her indulgent mistress ventured on anything that looked like independent action in matters belonging to her peculiar department.

Miss Marston was speaking.

'Well, Georgie, don't storm; I suppose, as you say, I can't expect you to cook for sick cats; still you can't reasonably object to my doing it myself if I choose, and you may as well leave me alone, and go to your own work, instead of standing glowering at me there.'

'And pray what's to come of my saucepan? You don't think I'll cook Christian victuals in it, after that beastly mess?'

'You can clean it, I imagine?'

'Clean it! and who's to fancy eating out of it after that—*ugh*!'

'Well, well!' said Mab in a conciliatory tone, 'I'll get a new one, and keep this for Mr. Browning!' (She forgot that she was speaking of the cat, and not of the poet.)

Georgie tossed her head so high that her cap fell off.

'*Mister* Browning, indeed! fine times when ladies' cats are called *Misters*! I do wish, mam, that some grand folks—Lady Blake, or somebody—would just call and catch you a cooking in the drawing-room for that beast of a hold tom cat.'

'It is too early,' said Mabel, 'and it's raining, besides; I shall have done before ——' But at that very moment sounded a loud double knock. 'Here, Georgie, quick! take away the saucepan.'

But Georgie had vanished, with a spiteful

celerity, not at all characteristic of her ordinary movements.

Miss Marston glanced wildly round with the 'utensil' in her hand, but finding no means of evasion, she quietly replaced it on the old-fashioned 'hob,' and turned to greet only Collingwood Fernleigh.

'Why, godma',' cried that observant young gentleman, 'what are you about? You look as guilty as if I had caught you, as Aunt Flo says, "disabled," which, to do you justice, I believe nobody ever did.'

'My dear boy!' answered Mabel, with rather suspicious 'effusion,' 'I am afraid you are wet; it is pouring rain!'

'Wet, not I. I'm as dry as Robert Browning *there* (pointing to the cat), or *there* (nodding towards the bookshelves). It's not raining now. Car'l will be here

directly; I wanted to see you first; I have a piece of important news for you. They are horribly dismal at the Park; though *that's* not my news.'

'What is the matter at the Park?'

'All at sixes and sevens,' answered the poet, 'the devil to pay, and no pitch hot!'

'Collingwood!' said Queen Mab, severely; 'let me beg you not to reserve all your graces of style and phrase, exclusively for your writings. Remember that you are in a lady's parlour.'

'Am I?' retorted Colin, glancing at the saucepan; 'I mistook it for her kitchen, this morning.'

'But,' resumed Mabel, who had reasons of her own for avoiding any allusion to her culinary operations, 'what *is* the matter with them at the Park?'

'Nothing particularly the matter, only a general depression of the spiritual barometer. My father has got the gout, and Miss Margaret's fractiousness has so worried Car'l, that he is more gloomy than I have seen him for years—since that sad affair at Naples.'

Miss Marston looked anxious.

'He is not ill?'

'Not ill, only dispirited and wretched; and my father is vexed about this quarrel between Fielding and his cousin, and so he bothers *me*, and threatens that he won't pay my debts unless I take orders and get married.'

'As for taking orders, that will stand over; as for marrying, I don't know who will have you, now that Helen is going to marry Mr. Benson.'

'Helen is not going to marry Benson.'

'Not yet; but that is how it will end, you will see.'

'I shall see nothing of the sort. She is going to marry *me*.'

'Indeed! What prophet told you that?'

'She told me so herself, last night.'

Miss Marston had been meditatively stirring her saucepan, but at this announcement, she sprang up, dropping the spoon, a pewter one, into the decoction, thereby imparting to it a metallic flavour that was probably not in the prescription.

'Colin! Come and kiss me this minute!'

'Not I, indeed,' answered the intending Benedick, demurely; 'my kisses are all promised now. I wonder at your dishonesty in asking for one.'

But seeing the tears in her eyes, he caught her in his arms, and rained on her

a shower of the noisy caresses he had lavished on her from his childhood.

'Colin!' she whispered, 'dear Colin, be true to her; she is so innocent and pure!'

'She is too good for me,' he answered, 'but I think, godma', I can make her happy.' Then after a pause, he added, with his usual lightness, 'She says that the first exercise of her authority will be directed to enforce more *respect* in my treatment of *you*.'

'She dares!' cried Mabel, wrathfully; 'the impertinent little chit! Why, we have kissed and kicked each other before she was born; that is, the kissing was on my side, and the kicking on yours. Hush! here comes Caryl.'

'I say, godma', what have you got in that saucepan; it smells good, I'll have some.'

'Oh no, it's not nice, its only some soup

I'm making for Robert; he is so poorly to-day.'

'Then if you've made it for him I'm sure it's good, I'll try it,' and Colin stooped over the saucepan, and skilfully fished out the half-stewed spoon.

Miss Marston looked uneasy, and tried to remove the saucepan, but he resisted.

'Let me alone; I *will* taste it.' And as she struggled with him for the spoon, Caryl came in.

'Well then, if you *will*, you must take the consequences! it's ——'

'It's *what*?'

'It's—*Mice*!'

Collingwood, who had just swallowed a second spoonful, upset the saucepan into the fire and recoiled, uttering in a deep growl something that sounded like 'condemnation.' Let us hope it was nothing more unseemly.

Caryl came forward.

'What are you two fighting about? what are you cooking, Mabel?'

'It was not my fault,' said Mabel, penitently, 'I told him not, I hope it won't make him ill.'

'You nasty little creature you! What put it into your head to make such a filthy compound?'

'Robert is so ill. I read somewhere that there is something curative to sick animals in their natural prey; but he would not eat the mice raw, so I thought I would make them into broth, and that ill-natured Georgie wouldn't make it.'

'I should think not, indeed! However, you have sacrificed me to your abominable cat; I feel very ill, poisoned in fact!'

'I hope,' said Miss Marston, 'that you do

not feel so ill as your brother looks; and she turned to the last comer, who had seated himself listlessly. 'Are you ill, my dearest?'

'I am quite well,' he answered. 'Have you heard of the pleasure party Miss Fielding has arranged for us to-morrow evening?'

'A pleasure party? No, what is it?'

'Merely a moonlight trip to the Beechen Coppice, to look for Willoughby Evans' ghost!'

Miss Marston looked shocked.

'I had no idea,' she said, 'that Margaret was in earnest when she made this absurd proposal the other day at Fernleigh.'

'Why should she not be in earnest?' answered Caryl bitterly; 'to some girls—to your Helen, for instance, Colin—there could be only horror and repulsion associated with the scene of a violence done on one with

whom she was once on terms of familiar intimacy; but Miss Fielding has so much courage, and—*she has no heart*!'

'She would not show much courage, I fancy, if the ghost really appeared.'

'Ghost?' echoed Caryl disdainfully; 'there is no ghost—I wish there were! I wish I were a ghost myself.' After which incoherent and attenuating aspiration he laid his arms on the table, and dropped his head upon them.

Collingwood, for whom Mabel's saucepan seemed to have a horrible fascination, was bending over it, stirring what remained in it after its upset. He looked up.

'Car'l, my good fellow, if I were you I'd let Miss Margaret go ghost-hunting by herself.'

'I can't understand it,' said Mabel; 'I have sometimes blamed Margaret for self-

will, but I have never found her unloving or ungentle, as she seems to *you*, Caryl.'

'I suppose,' said Collingwood meditatively, 'that a fellow does not like to be told that he does not know how to make love?'

'Is that the charge your superior wisdom would bring against me?' asked his brother, smiling in spite of his vexation.

'My experience is superior to yours, if my wisdom is not. And I don't believe that women like a man the better for all the reverential worship with which you approach them. I really think, Mabel, that he has never even ventured to give that girl a kiss!'

Caryl flushed up and said, very sharply for him:

'Just please to attend to your own affairs, Colin, and don't be impertinent.'

'There!' resumed the offender, quite un-

moved, 'I knew he'd go into a rage; but I only wished to intimate that possibly the young lady thinks you *cold*; and women do sometimes get very spiteful with lovers whom they think cold.'

'Has your "superior experience" taught you *that*, Sir Impudence?' asked Mabel, laughing.

'Well, not my personal experience, exactly; but the observation is correct, for all that. Car'l adores his mistress as something more than woman, and she repays his homage by thinking him something less than man. It's perfectly natural, if you look at it in the proper light—on the "theory of compensation" principle, you know.'

'Never mind him, Car'l,' said Queen Mab, turning on her handsome volatile godson the glance of loving contempt with which she frequently favoured him; 'he but speaks after the

manner of his kind. What can such men as he know of the finer shades of female character? As much as a scene-painter can know of enamelling!—the eye accustomed to coarse colouring cannot distinguish the blending of delicate tints. I daresay when Nebuchadnezzar was first brought in from grass, he hadn't much taste for flowers!'

'Godma', you're getting abusive.'

'Besides, Colin, Caryl has been studying your last volume of poems, and *that* may well have sickened him of "*kisses*" for the rest of his mortal life.'

'Miss Marston,' said the offended poet, 'you have no business to know anything about my last poems. Amatory verse is not a fit study for elderly maiden ladies.'

'A Christian gentleman,' retorted Mabel, 'or a Pagan gentleman either, in a Christian

country, has no business to write what ladies of any age may not read.'

'I dispute that assertion.'

'Of course you do; but go on disputing it and denying it in practice, and see what you'll come to. The very youths who flatter you now, when they grow—as many of them will—in wisdom, in holiness, in elevation of taste and feeling, will turn disgusted from a genius which only illumines the baser shrine where they no longer worship; and you will sink into the laureate of vice and profanity. When from your palace of song rises no lofty praise, no ennobling aspirations towards Him by whom you have been so richly gifted; when it echoes only the foulest and filthiest fables of a faith that has perished from its own corruptness; it will sink into a defiled and degraded ruin—"owls will hoot there, and satyrs will dance there."'

To which fiery exordium Collingwood made calm response:

'The discursiveness of that queer little person reminds me of a butterfly's erratic and aimless flight. Start her on what subject you will and in five minutes she will be as far from it as a nightingale in September from her nest. Let us (as our French master used to say) "return to our *chips*." Car'l, do you really mean to go to-morrow with Miss Fielding *spectroscoping*?'

'Certainly.'

'I would go with you,' said Mabel, 'but to-morrow I am off to London by the first train; I have an appointment on business, which I cannot postpone. But you'll go with your brother, Colin?'

'All right, it will be a jolly lark for me; I like the idea of a ghost-fowling; I would'nt like to be the fellow who is playing

the spectre though. If I catch him I'll realise his conception of the part as nearly as the law allows.'

'You think it is a trick some one is playing?'

'No doubt of it. *Something* has certainly been seen; it may be a device of some poaching or thieving rascals. We had better go armed.'

'Very well.'

'You and I, Margaret, and, I suppose, her maid.'

'She refuses to take her maid; indeed, I do not think any female servant would accompany her on such a quest. It is to be kept secret from Mr. Fielding, too.'

'Then we'll take Meredith; he's a stout fellow, and knows every turn in the Coppices, and we may have to give chase.'

'It is a silly business, altogether,' said

Queen Mab; 'still, Car'l, you take it too seriously.'

Caryl made no reply.

'Well,' said Colin, 'I must be off. I promised to be at home at two, to take Helen a walk if it cleared up. I suppose all those little attentions are expected of one in my present state of bondage? The wisdom of the ancients ——'

'Is foolishness,' interrupted Mabel.

'Of the ancients of the present day—and the present company—it certainly is,' retorted Collingwood the irreverent.

Queen Mab threw a book at him, but it only hit poor Robert Browning, who descended from his cushion with an expostulatory yell.

'Now, godma', you are getting violent as well as abusive, and we must part. Come along, old saint.'

And the 'old saint' complying with the invitation, saint and sinner departed in loving fellowship, leaving Mabel to her single combat with the Gorgon, still fiercely resentful of the desecration; of a 'Christian saucepan' for 'that nasty mess of catsmeat,' and after effecting a compromise, by the promise of a new saucepan, she put on her walking-dress, and marched off to the Manor House.

CHAPTER V.

ACQUITTED.

Ay me! whilst thee the storm and sounding seas
Wash far away, where'er thy bones are hurled.

LYCIDAS.

MABEL found Mr. Fielding and his daughter alone together in the library, and was warmly welcomed by them both. She had not seen Mr. Fielding for some weeks, and was shocked at the alteration in his appearance, and his extreme nervousness and irritability, so different from the quiet gentlemanly self-possession that had distinguished him when he first came to Hartsknoll. She thought, too,

that Margaret was growing thin and pale, and wondered if this was to be solely attributed to her anxiety about her father. And seeing that there would be no opportunity of a tête-à-tête that afternoon, as Mr. Fielding gallantly declared his intention of devoting it to the entertainment of his daughter's guest, she accepted his invitation to stay and dine with them, with the promise of the carriage to take her home at night. The news of the younger Fernleigh's engagement to Miss Grenfell was announced by the little lady, with an importance to which, in the estimation of her hearers, it was scarcely entitled; though they both expressed a cordial interest in it.

'The best thing in the world for him!' said the merchant approvingly; 'an amiable ladylike girl, with a good fortune, who I understand has been attached to him since

they were both children. A very suitable match indeed; and I dare say Collingwood will settle down steadily now, and take the family living after all, and devote his gift to *sacred* verse.'

Margaret was more than sceptical as to the probability of Colin's ever shining either as a preacher or a hymn-writer, but she was very glad of the engagement, for all their sakes. Helen was certainly fond of Colin, though if he had loitered much longer, she thought she might have become the wife of a gentleman who, being already in holy orders, might have got the 'family living' as well as the family heiress; and who if he could not write hymns, as Colin might one day do, could *sing* them, which Colin never would.

This allusion to Mr. Benson perfectly disgusted Miss Marston.

'As if he ever had a chance!' she cried; 'as if any man would ever have a chance to rival *my* boy!'

'I don't know,' said Margaret slily, 'Helen is very soft-hearted; I scarcely think she would have been able to persist in refusing Mr. Benson, only for the manifest inconvenience of engaging herself to two men at once!'

'And when will the marriage take place?' enquired Mr. Fielding. 'I suppose there will be no more delay than will be required by the lawyers for settlements and so forth?'

'And not much for that,' answered Mabel. 'Helen's fortune is strictly guarded against any risks from an extravagant husband, and Lady Fernleigh's is as strictly secured to her youngest son and his children. Collingwood will have no power to squander either fortune; but indeed the thoughtless expenditure of a

youth at college is no infallible test of his prudence in later life. The marriage will probably take place soon. Wouldn't it be nice if the brothers could be married on the same day?'

Mr. Fielding looked at his daughter, and smiled; but Margaret's face clouded instantly, though Mabel, who watched her intently, thought the cloud was rather of sadness than of displeasure. She led the conversation into other channels, and no further mention was made of the family at the Park.

After dinner Miss Marston remarked that her host's spirits began to flag. He became listless and silent, and as Margaret was leaving the dining-room with her visitor, he called her back, and said something to her in a low voice, which, on rejoining Miss Marston, she thus explained:

'You will excuse papa from re-appearing this evening, I know, dear Miss Marston? He goes to bed very early now, and though your visit to-day has been a real pleasure to him, even that little excitement has fatigued him.'

'Then,' said Queen Mab, 'if we are to be quite alone together this evening, suppose we adjourn to your dressing-room, after tea? I want a close conversation with you, and I can be more confidential and communicative there than in this gay drawing-room, which looks too stately for us two.'

Margaret cheerfully acquiesced in this proposal, and the pair were soon seated by the fireside, in what the young lady called her 'dressing-room,' though her maid always called it her 'boudoir,' and though it had more the air of a study than either.

Miss Marston buried herself in the

cushions of a luxurious settee, and put up her fairy feet on the fender-stool. Margaret would have seated herself at her knee, but she waved her off imperiously.

'No child, sit opposite to me; there, where the lamp-light will fall on your face. I want to see all I can of you to-night, dear; we have seen little of each other lately.'

Miss Fielding obeyed, smiling, and her visitor continued.

'You asked me, awhile since, to tell you Caryl's story. I am come to-night on purpose to tell it you.'

Margaret moved restlessly, and a bright colour mantled her cheek, but she spoke not a word.

'Don't you wish to hear it now? Have you lost your interest in it?'

'No, Miss Marston; I very much wish to

hear it, but why have I never heard it from *himself*?'

'I will answer that question later. For the present, you must be content with hearing it from me. You know that when Lady Fernleigh died I took charge of her orphan sons. Miss Fernleigh, now Mrs. Grenfell, was the ostensible mistress of her brother's house; but from what you have seen of dear Florence, you can imagine that she neither exercised nor cared to exercise any real authority in it. We lived at the Park until Colin was four, and Caryl eight years old; then we went to Italy, principally for Caryl's health. He was a very delicate child, affectionate and thoughtful beyond his years, and with a temperament so sensitive and excitable as to cause us much anxiety. As he grew up, his bodily health improved so much that a stranger could

have detected no signs of his early weakness; to us they were only traceable in a too marked tendency to serious, if not melancholy, thought. This was increased, I think, by his father sending him to be educated in Germany, as he hesitated at that time to incur the expense of an English University for him; and he there acquired a taste for subtle metaphysical studies which certainly were not fitted to diminish his constitutional ——'

'Gloom?'

'Well no, it did not amount to gloom at that period. I prefer to call it *gravity*.'

She paused, and Miss Fielding observed:

'There is nothing mysterious in all this; nothing of which Mr. Fernleigh need have hesitated to speak to me, or to anybody.'

'Don't be in a hurry, my dear; I am coming to the story to which Caryl dislikes

any allusion; but there is no *mystery* anywhere. How often must I remind you that reserve is not concealment?'

'In some cases it is.'

'Not in this, as you will see, if you let me go on. Florence married Mr. Grenfell when Helen was seven years old. Mr. Grenfell died within a year of his second marriage, leaving the guardianship of Helen to her step-mother and Sir Loys; and Florence returned to us with the child, but Sir Loys was richer then, and he took both Collingwood and Helen to be educated in England, Colin to Eton, and his ward to a boarding-school in London. On his return from England he brought back with him as valet to Caryl the eldest son of your father's gamekeeper, Meredith—a youth a few years older than his young master. Edward Meredith remained with us till his death.'

Miss Marston stopped, and looked fixedly at Margaret, who remained silent, but the colour had faded from her cheek, leaving it very pale, and though her eyes were bent on the floor, her clasped hands and parted lips betrayed the anxiety with which she listened.

'His death happened in this wise. He had lived with us some years, and we were all attached to him, especially Caryl, who, from having him so much about him from his boyhood, felt more for him as a friend than as a servant. He had only one fault, that was occasional intemperance; but he so seldom gave way to it, that it would have been no serious inconvenience to us, but that unhappily the least excess made him a furious madman, and he became really dangerous to those around him. While he was with us at Naples he married Mrs.

Grenfell's maid, a pretty French girl, with all the vivacity and coquetry of her countrywomen. Meredith was savagely jealous of her; I think without real cause; and he began to get drunk oftener, and grew even more violent during his drunken fits, continually at such times threatening his wife's life, until Sir Loys resolved to dismiss him, and to send the ill-matched pair back to his friends at Fernleigh. While this step was yet in contemplation, Caryl one day engaged a sailing-vessel to take his aunt and me a trip to Ischia. Sir Loys declined accompanying us, as he was afraid of seasickness; but both the Merediths were with us.'

'And Helen? and Collingwood?'

'They were in England, both of them; this took place five years ago; four years before you came to Hartsknoll. At that time Caryl had quite outgrown his boyish

fragility, and was rapidly developing into a fine, healthy, active young man. We had not long set sail when to our horror we discovered that Meredith was not sober. Aunt Flo and I wished to return to Naples, but the wind was fair for Ischia, our accommodations there were bespoken, and Caryl urged that with the wind in our favour we should be there almost as soon as we could land at Naples, for which both wind and tide were against us. So we went on, hoping that Meredith's fit would pass over. But he had access to our stores of wine and spirits, and of course abused his trust. Before long he came on deck in one of his very worst moods, and perceiving his wife addressing some words to one of the sailors, he sprang at her with a knife in his hand, and would assuredly have stabbed her had not Caryl thrown himself between them, and

after a fierce struggle succeeded in disarming him, and flinging him overboard.'

'But that was homicide! Surely he was not justified in doing that?'

'No homicide at all. Meredith could swim like a dolphin, and his master thought that a few minutes' immersion in cold water would cure him of his temporary insanity. But the cure was less speedy than he hoped. The man swam for some distance after the vessel, cursing and swearing frightfully, and threatening death and destruction to everyone on board, as soon as he should find himself on deck again. There was, as you may suppose, great confusion among us. We were alternately afraid that he would be drowned, and that he would murder some of us. Some entreated Caryl to lay to and bring him on board, and others—among whom was the wife—implored him to keep

him out until he should become less violent. But Caryl, though not easily roused, is apt to be implacable when greatly offended—very different in that, as in most other things, from his brother, who is as passionate and as forgiving as a child. Colin has oftener need to ask forgiveness than to grant it? Perhaps so, but he is always as ready to do the one as the other. However, we are not to speak of Collingwood now.

'Caryl's only reply to our remonstrances was to order the sailors to crowd all sail, and we were soon scudding away before the breeze, leaving the swimmer far on our lee. The boat, however, was ready to lower in a moment, and Caryl stood on the deck watching, and was in the act of turning to give orders to send the boat to pick him up when we all saw the wretched man throw up his arms, with a shrill cry that resounded over the

water, and down he went like a shot. In another instant Caryl had flung himself overboard, and was striking out desperately to his assistance. But the distance was too great, or in his excitement he missed the spot where the man sank, for he failed not only to rescue him, but even to find the body, though he dived repeatedly, and was brought back to the vessel so exhausted that we almost feared he would not survive to reach the land. But he recovered by the time we returned to Naples, and day after day he was on the shore, offering large rewards to the mariners for the recovery of the body, and frequently himself assisting in the search.

'It was brought back at last; the corpse of the man whom he had last seen in the prime of youthful vigour, who had shared with him in his boyish pastimes, who had

attended him in sickness and in health; it was brought back so disfigured and mutilated, that the young widow herself could not be permitted to look on it. This horrible revolting aspect of death, a death inflicted almost by his own hand, remained for ever impressed on Caryl's sensitive and overexcited imagination; and any form of extinct life seldom fails to recall it.'

Margaret shuddered.

'I have been very cruel,' she murmured.

'You have, indeed, my love; but it is not too late for you to make atonement. The grief of Meredith's widow was violent and demonstrative in the extreme. She wept and raved, and declared herself inconsolable; but she was married to another husband while Caryl yet pined in his sick chamber, where for months he had hovered on the brink of death. Had there been in his con-

stitution any latent germs of insanity they must have developed themselves then; but there were none, and the force of youthful vitality conquered. As soon as he was able to travel, his father brought him back to Fernleigh. He recovered, and the only effect that now remains of that bitter suffering, is an occasional languor and depression. Even this was rapidly disappearing, when the shock of Evans' horrible death revived it. But I have no fear but that it will pass away altogether in time, if not kept alive by reckless and *wanton* irritation.'

Here she stopped again, for there was a light, pattering noise—the sound of Margaret's tears, dropping one by one on her silk dress.

'Margaret, come to me!'

And the girl sprang into her outstretched arms, and sobbed upon her bosom.

'Oh, why did not Caryl place more confidence in me? Why was I not told this story long, long ago?'

'My child, you can understand that to us, who were eye-witnesses of this tragedy, any allusion to it could only be less painful than to your lover himself. To you he would doubtless have spoken of it, had your manner been such as to invite such a confidence. But, my dear Margaret, never to *him* have you shown the tenderness of which *I* know your nature is capable; and wounds like those can only be bared to the softest, the most pitying touch.'

'I have not understood Caryl,' she sighed, 'I have cruelly misjudged him.'

'And why have you not understood him? His character is by no means a difficult one to read, but you have attempted the study in the spirit of cold analysis, not of loving

sympathy, and its finer shades have evaded your scrutiny, as the delicate processes of healthy life recede before the scalpel of the vivisector, leaving only the morbid and diseased results of pain.'

Margaret smiled faintly.

'You differ from Collingwood's favourites, Mabel, who declared that Love was blind.'

'*Their* love was blind,' she answered, 'because it had never lifted its eyes to the one Source of all truth and beauty; yet only "in His light can we see light," and that light is love.'

CHAPTER VI.

A DOMICILIARY VISIT.

All houses wherein men have lived and died
Are haunted houses; through the open doors
The harmless phantoms on their errands glide,
With feet that make no sound upon the floors.

LONGFELLOW.

MARGARET sat meditating for a long time after Miss Marston had left her. She had been deeply moved to self-reproach by the story of Fernleigh's sorrow. And although it did not affect the evidence of Meredith, it completely reversed the inference she had hitherto drawn from the keeper's tale. No; if he had not invented that tale, to cast odium upon a

man whom he hated, and to gain the offered reward, still it could not have been Caryl whom he had seen in the wood. If Caryl, in a moment of passion, had struck that fatal blow, he would have fled from the spot in an agony of remorse and horror, and would certainly not have lingered to rob his victim or to conceal the fruit of his crime. Scarcely yet recovered from the anguish he had suffered, at having been the cause of injury to another, he would surely have been utterly crushed and prostrated by this fresh misfortune. Her judgment might safely pronounce a verdict of acquittal, without suspicion of being unduly biassed by her heart.

The ordeal of the spectre-chase was now unnecessary, yet she would not abandon it for all that. For Miss Fielding was self-willed, and although at Caryl's request she would have resigned her project, he had

expressed no wish that she should do so. Miss Marston had offered no remonstrance; but, above all, Collingwood (between whom and his future sister-in-law there was an incessant smouldering feud) had been unsparing and most provoking with his sarcasms and taunts; and though she might have yielded to his brother, she would never strike her flag to *him*. Besides, she was really curious to know what had so terrified the villagers and servants; it would do Caryl no harm, so just for this once—she would make it up to him by such warmth of affection as she had never yet shown.

Here the fire fell in with a crash, and she started up. It was late; everybody was gone to bed, her maid included, who was never allowed to stop up for her young mistress after eleven o'clock when she was at home. It was past twelve, so Margaret un-

dressed herself and betook herself to her virgin couch, when suddenly with a smothered cry—half sob, half groan—she sprang up in her bed, gazing with clasped hands and dilated eyes—on what? on the ghost? On nothing at all but the 'chimera dire' her fancy had conjured up. Her memory had recalled a story she once heard of a youth, sensitive and impressionable as Fernleigh, on whom the shock of some silly mystification of his comrades had produced such an effect that he had died a raving lunatic. What if Caryl's nerves should prove unequal to the trial of facing even a rustic impersonation of the unresting dead? What if ——? Bah! he was a healthy man now, not a sickly boy. Whoever heard of a man of five-and-twenty frightened to death by a sham ghost? And what respect could any woman feel for a man who could be capable of such terror?

Fancy a husband shrinking from dread of apparitions, and afraid to blow the candle out! And here Margaret, having as yet no husband to whom to delegate that important trust, blew out her candle herself (the extinguisher being non-apparent, as is the wont of extinguishers); then she glanced slowly, defiantly, round the chamber, as if to challenge any spectre that might be lying *perdu* watching its opportunity; and then, with true feminine inconsistency, she dived her head under the bedclothes and fell asleep.

She was still in the depths of her 'first sleep,' when she was awakened by a sharp bark from little Frisk, who lay in his basket under her dressing-table. One short, sharp bark, followed by a whimpering whine, as if from fear or some other cause he desired to retract and apologise for his hasty expression of alarm and displeasure.

Margaret sat up in bed and peered into the adjoining room, which, as we know, communicated with her bedroom by folding-doors, which, as usual, stood open. The moon was shining fitfully, throwing on the floor large solemn shadows of the branches of a sycamore that grew under the window; but except the slow flickering of those shadows, as the night wind stirred the boughs, there was no movement and no sound. The window of that apartment opened on a balcony whence a flight of narrow steps led down to the fruit-garden, walled on three sides, and with a door in the wall that opened into the Coppice. This window was guarded by shutters, of which only the lower half was fastened, as Miss Fielding was fond of as much light as could be had. Many young ladies would have been afraid of sleeping in a room shut off from the principal rooms in

the house, and to which access could be so easily obtained by ill-intentioned persons from without. But Margaret was not timid. House-breaking was almost unheard of in that quiet district, and Mr. Fielding had taken precautions against surprise by means of a strong bar to the lower shutters, to which a bell was attached, while at the foot of the steps was chained a large mastiff whom no stranger could approach with impunity; who was not addicted to giving tongue at night, and who could not be tampered with by tramp or burglar, as the garden was out of the way of passers-by or visitors to the servants' 'back settlements.' Moreover, Mr. Fielding's bedroom was on the other side of the landing, within hearing of her call for assistance; and to complete her security, a bell-rope, at the head of her bed, communicated with an alarm-bell that

hung over every bed in the house; so that any one sleeping at the Manor House had the satisfaction of feeling that if he or she were frightened in the night they could frighten everybody else in the place as well. Such a peal of bells as that, Mr. Fielding naturally thought would terrify the most determined evil-doers, and arouse the most lethargic slumberers.

Margaret had no dread of invaders on her sacred privacy, as, sitting up in her bed, she leaned forward to look into the next room; but she felt a little 'eerie' and uncomfortable, as people suddenly awakened are apt to do, especially when their last waking thoughts have been such as hers. But no—there was nothing there—and so Frisk seemed to intimate by his silence. So she lay back, and fell asleep again. More lightly this time; for what now awoke her was the tinkle—

the very faint, low tinkle—of a bell; the bell upon the window-shutter! And now she did not start up, but lay quite motionless, straining her sense to listen—so sadly confused by the loud beating of her heart.

Decidedly, Miss Margaret Fielding was frightened! If she had had a husband, I am really afraid that her fears would so far have overpowered her self-respect that she would have made him get up to see what was the matter!

There was another tinkle—fainter this time; and bounce! upon the bed sprang the little dog, and nestled lovingly against his mistress' cheek, as if he would say, 'Don't be uneasy, I assure you it's all right.' Of course, it *was* all right! The little bell on Frisk's collar—he often went to bed in his clothes—had tinkled in his movements, and only half awake, she had mistaken it for the bell of

the shutter. And to be frightened at *that*! She was ashamed of herself. Just then her eyes rested on the cheval-glass which stood at the foot of her bed, in such a position as to reflect the moonlight that streamed from the glass door in the adjoining room.

The shadow, moving slowly across it, was not that of the sycamore boughs! She kept her gaze rivetted on the mirror, and her heart stopped beating; felt as if it never would beat again. The moon was low, and the light was dim, but the figure she beheld was quite distinct. A tall figure robed in some loose grey or white drapery that concealed its definite outlines, but the height bespoke it masculine. His back was to the glass, and he had on his head a straw or felt hat, with a rather wide rim that shadowed his face and neck. He was bending slightly forwards, and moving his

spectral hands with a slow, uncertain gesture. If it had been a living mortal one might have fancied it was feeling for the lock of the door, but who ever heard of a ghost locking a door behind him? Slowly it waved its hands, slowly it raised itself from its stooping posture, then turned slowly round, and with a gliding noiseless step passed—where? That Margaret never could have told. Her heart bounded and banged so loud, that it would have drowned to her the noise of any alarm-bell. Ringing noises were in her ears, and cold dews of horror bathed her from the crown of her head to the tips of her toes. She did not lose consciousness, nor even self-command, for when the deadly sickness had abated, her hand was on the bell-rope; but she checked herself, recollecting the danger of alarming her father in his nervous and irritable state of health. After

all, she was no coward; she leapt from the bed, took a match from the dressing-table, and lit first the candle at her own bedside, and then all the waxlights on the table and chimney-piece in the sitting-room, pouring a flood of light into every corner of both apartments.

Then she looked round. Nothing to be seen. Everything was just as she had left it. The lower window-shutter barred, with the bell attached; the outer door fast closed. She went to the window, unfastened it, and leaning out, called in a low voice, 'Bevis!'

The mastiff shook himself lazily in his kennel, crawled forth, rattling his chain as he moved, and answered her soft call by measured thumps of his massive tail upon the gravel-walk. Margaret closed the window, refastened the shutter, and got into bed again, but left the candles burning.

She felt disinclined to trust herself to the fickle mercies of the moonlight. Then, by way of giving tone to her disordered nervous system, she began reciting to herself the catalogue of ships in Homer's Iliad, which her grandmamma used to impose on her when a young girl as an occasional penitentiary exercise, and which she had since been accustomed to have recourse to as a soporific. It proved its efficacy in this extraordinary emergency, for before she got to the fourteenth line she was fast asleep, and did not awake until her maid came to call her.

Ghosts evince more discretion than might be expected from beings of their erratic and often inconsequent habits, when they choose the night season for their dreary frolics, for not even the Royal Dane himself would have successfully accomplished his

mission had he chosen a bright sunshiny morning to announce it on. As Bessie took down the shutters, and the full rays of the glad morning sun streamed into the room, while the frosty *rime* sparkled on the branches of the sycamore, and a pert robin, setting his head on one side for the better view of the interior, saucily flapped his wings and hopped away with a clear derisive whistle, Margaret at once abjured all her experience of the supernatural, and felt ashamed and humiliated at the remembrance of her terror. She pronounced it to have been a mere illusion, a kind of bastard night-mare, evoked from the skirts of some vanishing dream, taking form from the idle gossip of the servants and the flickering moon-shadows on the glass. Still, what she had suffered! Her sufferings had been real enough; and once more she trembled, lest she might

be preparing similar torments for her lover. Well, she would give up the intended night-walk; she would tell Caryl so when he came, and Colin might scoff at her as he pleased. Of course, she was not influenced in this magnanimous resolve by any disturbance remaining from her midnight agitation —oh dear no!

CHAPTER VII.

HUNTING A SPECTRE.

I am a woman:
And all things bid me love;—my dignity
Is this—to cast my virgin pride away,
And find my strength in weakness.

Saints' Tragedy.

But Caryl did not make his appearance that morning; he sent only a brief note, enquiring after Mr. Fielding's health, and promising to call in the evening, with Collingwood. Mr. Fielding declined to leave his room, and under pretext of drowsiness declined his daughter's society there. So Margaret was left to her own reflections, and her own

reflections were not altogether pleasant just then. The gloomy suspicions suggested by Meredith's story had fled, like the foul shadows they were, before the pure serene daylight that Mabel's simple narrative had thrown on Caryl's character; but how long had she uselessly tormented both her lover and herself, by suffering them to brood in her imagination! Why, a sentimental love-sick girl like Helen Grenfell would have repelled with scorn any insinuations against the man she loved—and she would have been right. Her simple feminine instinct was after all truer than her friend's proud intelligence! She felt humiliated as she acknowledged this, and anxious to atone to Caryl for the injustice she had secretly done him. She would write him one of those little playful caressing notes which he so dearly loved from her, and

tell him that she abandoned the project he had disapproved. She opened her writing-table, and paused, pen in hand. No, she would not write; she owed him a fuller compensation for her secret disloyalty. She would wait till he came to fetch her, and then give to her yielding, all the charm and grace of soft tones and winning looks, and perhaps,—when that odious Colin should have departed,—of something sweeter still, and very rare from *her*.

And there should never more be any barrier between them. She would bury her dead out of her sight, and Willoughby's ghostly memory should never again embitter her happy love. For yes, she dared whisper to herself now she did really *love* Caryl Fernleigh!

Thereupon she betook herself to her wardrobe, selected the dress he had said

became her best, braided her rich hair into its richest coronal, chose from the conservatory a bouquet of his favourite tea-scented roses for her corsage, and then, softly singing to herself, she gazed into the mirror with a sunny smile, and thought that she really looked very pretty. She did not deceive herself there! The furrow was smoothed from her fair brow, her bright eyes glanced frank and free, and round her lips, still firmly chiselled and resolute, the long-repressed dimples peeped archly forth, like snowdrops after frost, as she smiled in girlish pride in her own beauty—with a womanly consecration of even girlish vanity to the triumph of one beloved. Margaret Fielding's haunting demon was exorcised at last. She felt free to love, and happier in that freedom than in all her boasted superiority to female prejudice and infirmity.

Too late, Margaret; too late!

When she had finished dressing she ran to her father's room. He looked at her rather languidly, complained of lassitude, asked had she sent that note for the doctor, and announced his intention of going early to bed. No, she need not come in again; he would rather she did not. And with an embrace, he dismissed her to her solitary dinner. Afterwards, she went into the drawing-room, sat down to the piano, and played a 'fantasia' of her own composing, extemporised to give expression to the gladness that filled her breast. But Frisk objected to music when his mistress and he were alone together, as being an encroachment on his privileges; and he set up such a dismal howl that Bevis in the garden, on the other side of the house, heard and responded to it. The canine duet affected Margaret

unpleasantly, and rising from the piano she went to the sofa, to console and silence Frisk. Some minutes passed in that familiar communion whose significant sweetness can only be duly appreciated by the happy possessor of a thoroughly confidential dog, then she glanced at the timepiece, walked across the room, looked at herself in the glass again, arranged her draperies around her with proper dignity and grace, rang the bell for coffee, and forgetting that she had done so, started with a guilty confusion when, after a complacent contemplation of her lithe figure in the glass, she turned and found that she had been attitudinising for the benefit of the footman, who stood mutely awaiting her orders at the door.

She finished her coffee, and was beginning to think that the clock was losing, and that Caryl was late, when the clock struck ten. The hall bell rang, and she sprang forward

to greet the two Fernleighs. Alas for all the honied speeches, the coaxing smiles, she had been storing up for her lover! The words died into silence, the smile faded on her lips, the moment her eyes met his! So cold, so alienated, so unloving a glance had never met hers in those eyes before. Collingwood, too, looked graver than usual, and even a little anxious; and she felt powerless to read her recantation before such severe censors as those. And when Caryl said very gravely: 'You must make haste to get ready, Miss Fielding; Meredith is waiting outside, and the moon will set in another hour,' she acquiesced silently, and left the room with a timid, almost deprecating, glance at Colin, which that unfeeling individual received in entire apathy.

She returned presently in her walking-dress, cloaked and hooded, for the night was cold.

'Is Mr. Fielding up?' asked Caryl.

'He is asleep. I looked in at him as I passed his door just now; he is fast asleep. Caryl,' she added hesitatingly, 'perhaps we had better give up this excursion to-night?'

'Pray do not sacrifice your wishes from consideration to *me*,' answered Mr. Fernleigh, very courteously: 'My brother and I intend certainly to watch to-night, but if you *now* think that such an enterprise is not suited to *you*, I am quite of your opinion, and shall be happy to bid you good evening.'

This injudicious speech, and still more the tone in which it was made, aroused Margaret's resentment.

'If *that* was the way he chose to take it!'

And without another word she accepted his offered arm, and they went into the hall, where Meredith was waiting for them.

At the sight of this man, who scowled

ominously on the young people as they came towards him, Margaret felt a thrill of shame and self-reproach, but he saluted her very civilly, and they left the house together, Collingwood pausing a moment, to say to the old butler, who was watching the party with undissembled curiosity :

'It's all right, Harrison; keep the door open for us till the moon goes down; we've got nets and nooses, and we're going to catch and bring home the ghost.'

'We shall exorcise it, at all events,' said Caryl, looking back with a smile; 'you will all be ashamed of avoiding the Coppice, when you see your young mistress can venture there.'

The old servant bowed respectfully, but as the party disappeared among the woodland shadows, he muttered to himself:

'That's all very well, but I guess Miss

Fielding cares more to see what sperrit there is in *you*, Mr. Fernleigh, than to find the sperrit in the wood; and as for *exercising* it, why ghosts as walk about all night, when they ought to be a sleeping pleasant in their goring graves, take more exercise nor is good for them, nor for us either. I wish you well through it, gents; them dogs didn't howl so for nothing, to-night! take care that instead of your catching the ghost, the ghost don't catch *you*!'

Unconscious of Harrison's boding monologue, Caryl and Margaret, followed closely by Collingwood and Meredith, walked for some way through the moonlit 'rides' in silence. But Collingwood did not love silence.

'I say, Car'l,' he cried out, 'is it forbidden by the spiritualistic code to speak when we are out spirit-hunting?'

'Master and I,' observed Meredith, 'never opened our lips t'other night, when we went arter it, and it never come a near us. May be a little chat would wake it up, Mr. Collingwood.'

'Leave the spirit alone,' said Caryl peevishly, and rather inconsistently, considering what he had come out for. 'Look, Margaret, how beautiful are those masses of frosted silver on the stem of that birch, "The Lady of the Woods;" see the stars glimmering amid the slender sprays, like jewels in a maiden's hair.'

'And just look,' added the more practical Colin, 'at that pheasant roosting on that hawthorn tree. I've a good mind to knock it over with my stick, and take it home for supper.'

'Oh, you barbarian!' laughed Margaret, do you call yourself a sportsman? Stop,

Meredith, that's not the way to the Beechen Coppice.'

'We beat that cover t'other night,' replied Meredith, 'and there warn't no ghost there; it's no use to try it again.'

'You are afraid, you old chicken-heart,' said Colin; 'but we must station ourselves within sight of the dell if we are to see any spectre at all, for it's there he's always been seen.'

'We can stand under yon beech,' answered the gamekeeper; 'from the high ground there we can see the Coppice, and some way beyond it; if we go down into the dingle we should lose sight of him, if he passed a step out of it. Let us wait by yon beech, gentlemen.'

To this arrangement no one offered any objection, for though Margaret's nerves were firm, the melancholy associations of the

Coppice were not such as she was anxious to face, especially at that hour, and Collingwood noticed that from time to time, as his brother glanced towards the dell, an irrepressible shudder crept over him. So they all halted on the spot Meredith had indicated, on some rising ground, whence they could look into and over the haunted Coppice.

Before them stretched a long alley of mossy verdure, upon which poured the full stream of the moon's low and level rays, but the masses of shadow lay heavily on the glade beneath them. All was unbroken stillness, not a breeze stirred the branches, not a bird rustled in the ivy that clothed them, the air was keen and frosty. Margaret shivered a little, and Caryl bent over her and folded her cloak more closely round her, but, loverlike as the action appeared

to her companions, she herself felt that there was missing from it the old tenderness that had made the commonest courtesy a caress.

'I wish,' said Collingwood, 'that the ghost had chosen a summer season for his manifestations, it's deuced cold standing here. I say, Meredith, if you climb up into this tree you'll be able to command a better view of the Coppice, and the paths leading to it, and to give us earlier notice of any one approaching.'

'My climbing days are mostly over, Mr. Collingwood,' replied the keeper, 'but if you'll help me up to the fork of the tree I can make my way up higher, to see a bit further than I can down here.'

'All right, old fellow; here you are!' and with a vigorous effort, aided by the elder man's exertions, he hoisted him up the trunk

of the tree, and then Meredith commenced slowly and cautiously ascending the branches.

Meantime Margaret was inwardly confessing, that in this freak of hers there was very little to be proud of. It was very comfortless, standing there in the cold, a spectacle possibly to some mischievous rustic who might be slily laughing at her behind an adjacent tree. The remembrance of Willoughby Evans slain in the prime of youth, lying cold and bloody among the brushwood beyond her—this remembrance was now too vivid, and pressed on her with a sadness that overpowered fear. Even had her former suspicion been just, and had Caryl, in a moment of ungovernable passion struck the fatal blow, by what right would she have imposed upon him a trial which would have acted, not on his moral sense,

but on his physical weakness. And what if she had stretched her power over him too far? For Caryl was not like himself to-night. He did not seem in the least nervous, nor even excited; but there was a cold reserve in his manner to her that made her feel as if something had removed him to a long distance from her—a distance she could not lessen—an ever-widening chasm that she could not pass,—between them.

'I vote,' said Colin suddenly, 'that this spectre is an impostor and a sneak; and that we all go home, before Miss Fielding catches her death of cold. We will take some hot spirits, more genial than this chill absentee, and post him up in the morning as a defaulter.'

'I think, too,' said Margaret, timidly, 'that we have done quite enough to reassure the servants and the villagers. Shall we go back, Caryl?'

'As you please,' answered that gentleman indifferently, 'I am at your service for as long or as short a time as you like. Meredith, what can you discern from your perch up there?'

'There ain't nothing as I can see but the stems of the white birches shining in the moonlight. I'll get up to the topmost bough, and see all as can be seen.'

'Take care, old boy,' Collingwood remonstrated, 'those top boughs are rather crazy. If you come down too quickly from that height your climbing days will be over with a vengeance. You are not as light as thistledown, Meredith.'

'No fear,' answered the man, and he clambered to the top of the tree, and paused.

'I can see right across the dingle from here, and there ain't nowt to be seen.'

At that moment, Margaret laid her hand on Collingwood's arm, and pressed closer to her lover.

'Hush!' she whispered, 'listen!'

All were breathlessly silent; but even in that moment of excitement Margaret noticed that Caryl's heart did not beat quicker against her hand, and that though he drew her a little nearer to his side, it was with a gesture of protection that he bent forward, as if to interpose between her and any danger or alarm. So they listened; there was a faint crackling sound as of a footstep advancing swiftly along the glade fronting them, and leading from the house, hurrying over the crisp fallen leaves; but the trees there grew thick and close, and their broad shadows intercepted the moonlight, and flung it on the path in wavering uncertain shapes. The sound became more distinct,

and then a dim figure was seen emerging from among the trees. Collingwood put his hand in his breast-pocket and drew forth a pistol.

'There is only *one*,' he whispered; 'take care of Margaret; I will only fire over his head to scare him.'

His brother made no reply. The figure drew nearer, came out into the full moonlight, and kept advancing steadily with a rapid gliding motion. A tall form, draped in what, under ordinary circumstances, might have been taken for a grey dressing-gown, and with a wide-brimmed hat on its head. The height, the dress, the motion, were those of the shape Margaret had seen in her room. For a moment all the blood rushed to her heart and almost suffocated her; then, with a sudden exclamation, she was springing forward, when Caryl drew

her forcibly back, and Colin *sans façons* clapped his hand on her mouth. The figure drew nearer, was almost within arm's reach, when a hollow groan resounded from the tree, and down came the keeper, crashing headlong through the branches, and lay a senseless heap at his fellow-watchers' feet. The spectre paused, as if the noise had startled him, and moved his head slowly from side to side with an uncertain, hesitating gesture; then he passed on. Caryl unclasped Margaret's hand, which clung convulsively to his arm, and saying, in a hurried whisper, 'Take her, Colin; and look to Meredith—he has fainted,' he bounded off and disappeared on the path the ghost had taken. Margaret would have followed, but Collingwood's grasp of steel withheld her.

'Be careful,' he said; 'to awaken *a somnambulist* may be death to him.'

And Margaret hid her face on his shoulder, sobbing forth :

'Oh, my poor dear papa!'

For in the pale rigid face—the eyes wide open, but fixed and glazed—they had recognised the features of Mr. Fielding!

CHAPTER VIII.

AND CATCHING HIM.

How those fallen leaves so rustle on the path
With whispering noise, as though the earth around me
Did utter secret things. JOANNA BAILLIE.

CARYL had also recognised the sleep-walker, and had instantly divined his condition, not only by his dress, or rather his undress, which was certainly not what any one would have consciously assumed for a stroll in the woods on a frosty October night—but also from the mechanical precision of his movements, and his fixed unspeculative stare.

Margaret, ignorant of her lover's true nature, would have thought it impossible that he could have ventured to face a situation so trying even to men of strong nerves as to find himself alone in the wood by moonlight with so strange and weird a leader. But what Caryl so morbidly recoiled from, were the associations of a painful memory and a melancholy train of speculative thought. Of personal danger he had no fear, and as little of superstitious terrors. He followed unshrinkingly upon Fielding's gliding footsteps as he went swiftly up a narrow ride leading from the wider avenue where Collingwood kept guard over Margaret and Meredith. Possibly his fortitude might not have been proof against the gloomy and terrible associations connected with the Beechen Coppice if the somnambulist had led him *there*; but that trial was

spared him. Mr. Fielding walked steadily in the opposite direction, avoiding, with a mysterious instinct, the low sweeping boughs of the beeches and the gnarled roots across the path, over which his pursuer frequently stumbled, and threading the windings of the avenue for some hundred yards, when he suddenly halted beneath a large tree; whether oak or sycamore Caryl could not distinguish at that distance and by the imperfect light. He drew nearer, cautiously keeping in the shadow of the pendant branches, and treading softly on the moss that edged the path. He was near enough now to mark the face of the sleeper, with the moonlight shining on those terrible eyes blankly staring into vacancy, beholding the objects around him, not as reflected upon their insensible retina, but as impressed by memory upon the dreaming brain. Presently he bent

forward towards what appeared to be a hollow in the trunk of the tree, and drew forth a small object, the shape of which Fernleigh could not distinguish, as a tall spray of fern waved between it and his eyes, and before he could gain a nearer view the somnambulist, still grasping it, fled onward, more rapidly than before. His pursuer had some difficulty in keeping him in sight, and once he seemed to disappear in an avenue leading to the Old Chase, but immediately afterwards, to his great relief, he descried him standing in the full moonlight beside another and more stunted tree. Here he stood turning his head slowly from side to side, as if in doubt or perplexity; and then he stooped down and concealed the object he held among the roots of the tree, carefully covering it with fern and brushwood.

Meantime, Caryl was hastily knotting his white handkerchief round a sapling that grew beside him, in order to mark the spot, and had scarcely time to draw back when the sleepwalker again sped past him, so closely that the cape of his dressing-gown brushed his sleeve. Caryl put little distance between them this time, and followed him swiftly back along the path he had come by, and close to the old oak where his brother and Margaret were anxiously bending over the still senseless keeper. Yet no! not senseless, for as the spectre-like shape flitted past him he uttered a faint groan, and murmured something inaudible to those who, with their eyes fixed on him, did not observe Caryl's approach until he laid his hand on Margaret's.

'Quick, Margaret!' he whispered, 'follow your father to the house; should he awake

suddenly, your familiar voice will startle him less than mine. Go with her, Colin, and send help here for Meredith. I will wait with him till you return. He has swooned from terror.'

'No,' answered Margaret, 'I will follow papa alone. He has come through the fruit-garden by the steps from my dressing-room. Bevis would tear any one else to pieces who should go that way. I am not afraid; I will send some of the men with lights to help you with Meredith.' The moon was now fast sinking.

Caryl hesitated, but before he could answer she had withdrawn her hand from his, and fled fleet as a fawn along the moonlit path her father had taken.

'Let her go,' said Collingwood, 'she is safe enough, for her father precedes her, and his appearance would be sufficient to scare away

any evil-doer, were such lurking in the wood. Besides, the gate of the fruit-garden is just at the end of that path, much nearer than the front of the house by which we came.'

As he spoke, he was supporting Meredith's head on his knee. Caryl looked down on him.

'Is he not coming-to yet, Colin? This is a long fainting-fit.'

'The youth laid the sufferer's head very gently on the turf, and rising, drew his brother aside.

'I am afraid it is more than a fainting-fit, and that he has received some serious injury from his fall.'

'I trust not,' said Caryl anxiously, and returning to the motionless form, he asked:

'Meredith, my poor fellow, are you much hurt?'

A moan was the only answer.

'Let us lift him, Colin, and ascertain where the injury is.'

But at the first attempt to raise him, the low moan rose to such a hideous shriek of agony that the young men desisted, and looked at one another in dismay.

'Something must be done,' said Collingwood; 'I will run to the house for assistance to carry him to the lodge.'

But the wounded man groaned again, more with mental than bodily anguish.

'Don't leave me, gentlemen, for God's sake,' he murmured. 'The ghost! the ghost!'

'I will stay with you, my good fellow,' said Fernleigh; 'go at once, Colin.'

Away he flew, and Caryl felt in his waistcoat pocket for a bottle of volatile salts which Margaret, in playful derision, had given him to carry for her when they

started from the house. The stimulant revived the sufferer, and he spoke more distinctly.

'I never believed it, no, never; and my own eyes have seen him; he can't lie still in his grave.'

Caryl felt his situation the reverse of exhilarating, and to change the current of Meredith's thought, he asked:

'Where is your pain, my man? No limbs broken, I hope. Did your foot slip on a decayed branch?'

The man muttered indistinctly:

'No, no; *he* knocked me down, he did. I saw him stalking up, and then he struck me down.'

'Good heaven!' thought Caryl, 'the shock has turned the poor creature's brain. Don't be down-hearted, Meredith. Mr. Collingwood will soon be back, and we'll

have you safe in bed, and the doctor will soon set you to rights.'

But the man remained silent, and Fernleigh looked pityingly down on him, and prayed with feverish impatience for his brother's return. From time to time he glanced at the setting moon, wishing he had some spell by which to retain her until his guard should be relieved, and amid all this distress and perplexity he had a sense of lively curiosity respecting the sleep-walker's mysterious movements. 'What can Fielding have hidden away in that old tree? Something of great interest to him, or he would never ramble in his sleep to look at it. He must be in a shocking state of health. I am glad Margaret has written for the doctor. He will be in good time for the poor fellow here.'

At that moment the moon disappeared

beneath the horizon, and the wounded man groaned. Caryl bent over him.

'Only a few minutes. Courage, Meredith, my brother will be here directly.'

He laid his hand gently on the sufferer's brow; the cold sweat of agony was standing on it. He wiped it with his handkerchief, and offered the salts to him again, when suddenly lights gleamed along the avenue, and Collingwood's welcome voice hailed him.

'Thank heaven, you are come at last! for Meredith seems very bad!'

The relief party consisted of Collingwood and two stalwart grooms, bearing a large plank or ironing board, which they had taken from the laundry, and placed a mattress upon it.

'I had to wait,' he answered, 'until Bob had waked up and dressed himself, and searched about for this litter. We were

anxious not to arouse the maids, for they would have made such a commotion they would have waked up the governor, who can only ——'

'Hush!' said Caryl, and the imprudent speaker stopped short. The men placed the litter on the ground, and were preparing to lift the gamekeeper, when Caryl whispered:

'Mr. Fielding? Margaret?—are they both safe at home?'

'All right,' answered his brother, 'the old gentleman went back to his bed quite quietly, and Margaret locked him into his room, and promised faithfully that she would go to bed immediately. Harrison is sitting up till these men go back. Hallo! men, be careful,' as a piercing cry from Meredith responded to their efforts to raise him.

Caryl caught up a lantern, and threw the

light upon the ghastly features of the sufferer.

'He has swooned again; let us lift him before he recovers consciousness.'

Gently and tenderly the young men raised him, and then, preceded by the servants with the lanterns, bore him to the lodge, walking swiftly and steadily, to avoid jolting their agonised burthen.

The sound of voices and steps at that late hour had alarmed the keeper's wife, who hastily throwing on some clothes descended to receive her husband. The young Fernleighs helped to lay him on his bed, and sent one of the servants back to the Manor House for a horse, on which to hurry away for a doctor; and desiring the other man to stay with Mrs. Meredith until further help arrived, they were preparing to leave the cottage when the keeper motioned to speak.

Collingwood bent down to receive his whisper:

'Don't let' em touch me, Mr. Collingwood, till the doctor comes. I'm done for, and when I send for you, come as quick as ever you can; mind you come quick.'

'I'll come in the morning, anyhow,' answered Colin, 'to hear what the doctor says; keep your heart up, Meredith, you are not the man to be frightened for a broken bone or two. Keep him quiet till Dr. Foster comes, Mrs. Meredith, and send up to the Park for anything you want. Good-night.'

'Hallo! Car'l!' he cried, running after his brother, who was flitting back into the Coppice with his lantern, like a gigantic firefly, 'that's not the way to Fernleigh; you're never going to the Manor House at this time of night?'

Caryl stopped, and waited till his brother came up with him.

'We have more to do, Colin, before we can go home. What do the servants at the Manor House know?'

'They know nothing. I told Harrison that Miss Fielding had gone to her own room, through the fruit-garden, and that Meredith had hurt himself in climbing to get a good view of the Coppice. Margaret joined us while we were waiting for the men to dress, and said, quite calmly, that she was afraid this freak of hers might cost the keeper a limb.'

'It may cost him his life,' said Caryl bitterly, 'but why should she be less calm for that? She has had her own way; she has proved *her* strength, and tested *mine*. Strength is always calm,—and sometimes cruel.'

'Well, but old fellow, what are you going back to the Manor House for?'

'I am not going back to the Manor House. I am going to the spot where I followed Fielding.'

'Why the ——?'

'Have patience, and listen. The sleep-walker has hidden something at the root of an old tree; we must take charge of it and restore it to him in the morning, lest it fall into wrong hands.'

'What is it?'

'I don't know—we are going to see—the concealment of it appears to have been the sole object of his nightwalk.'

Colin gave a low whistle.

'Can you find the tree?'

'Yes, I have marked the spot with my handkerchief.'

'Well, we must take away the mark;

otherwise I would advise you to go quietly to bed without meddling with Fielding's secrets—waking or sleeping. You may get small thanks for your officiousness.'

Caryl's night stroll might have given him cold in his temper, he answered so peevishly:

'I don't want his secrets, but we must take care of his property; it may be his purse or his cheque-book.'

'It may be his nightcap?' suggested Colin, to which his brother vouchsafed no reply.

They walked on, Colin whistling carelessly, Caryl silent and grim, until they reached the spot which he had marked; then he sprang forward to the old tree and began groping among the hollows at its root. But he only groped to fish forth some toadstools, which he flung away in disgust.

'There is nothing; can he have taken it with him after all?'

'Are you sure that there was anything?'

'Perfectly certain; I saw the light gleam on some metal.'

'There's no metal on cheque-books. Stop, let me look; its an old rabbit-hole, and goes deeper than you think. Yes—here it is, Eureka!' And rising, he held out to his brother Mr. Morton's long-lost portfolio.

Caryl held it to the light, and read the name inscribed on it; the morocco was blistered with damp and mildew, the silver was tarnished, but the inscription in raised letters was plainly legible. The brothers looked at one another in mute astonishment. There was a long pause, broken by the resonant clang of the stable clock at the Manor House, that struck two. Caryl started as if it had pealed close at his ear; his nerves had been overstrung. Collingwood coolly put the

book into his pocket, and taking the lantern from his brother's hand, slipped his arm through his.

'Come, Caryl, we'd better go home,' said he.

CHAPTER IX.

THE POET AS LOVER.

I've wandered on the mountains, mist-bewildered:
And now a breeze comes, and the veil is lifted,
And priceless flowers, o'er which I trod unheeding,
Gleam ready for my grasp. KINGSLEY.

NOT even Collingwood Fernleigh's nerve could so resist the excitement of that strange night's work as to enable him to sleep as quietly as usual, through the hours that remained of it, on his return home. He did sleep towards dawn, however, after long tossing and turning, in perplexed ruminations upon the singular discovery of the missing portfolio, an object which had been

made familiar to him by the description of it in Morton's advertisements, and having at length fallen asleep, he would have conscientiously fulfilled his usual measure of slumber had he not been awakened by the sun shining full upon his face at the hour of nine. He jumped up, and dressing himself expeditiously, repaired to the breakfast-room, where he found Helen Grenfell alone. She welcomed him with such a happy smile, such a glad air of cheerful homely simplicity, that all the events of the midnight hours seemed to him but a horrible nightmare. The very sight of her at the breakfast table, in her pretty morning dress, with her graceful domestic ways, quite refreshed him. He felt as if he were emerging on a green lawn, fresh from sweet April showers, from the artificial gloom, or more artificial glare, of a morning exhibition of 'Pep-

per's ghost.' He held her hand in his, as he returned her smiling greeting, and looked so intently into her soft dark eyes that they dropped beneath his gaze, and a faint blush gave to her cheek the beauty that plainer faces than hers can borrow from tender feeling.

'She's not so handsome as Margaret,' he thought, 'but thank heaven she's not an intellectual woman! She knows how to love, and doesn't *wish* to know how to reason. We want women to love us, and only men to reason with. At least *I* do, and so may Car'l, before long, if indeed he does not already! And he held her hand so long, that, to cover the slight bashfulness which it gave him so much pleasure to contemplate, she said at last:

'You are very late this morning, you two gentlemen. I have been waiting breakfast this half-hour. Sir Loys has the gout again.

I have sent up his breakfast, and taken up mamma's. I was beginning to think of sending up yours too!'

'Is my father very bad?'

'No; he's dressed, Lewis says, but he's afraid of using his foot to come down stairs. Where on earth is Caryl?'

'Hasn't he been down yet?' asked Collingwood, a little uneasily. 'I'll go and look for him.'

'Take your coffee before it gets cold, and you need not leave it to go in search of your brother, for here he comes.'

As Caryl entered, his brother darted at him a keen glance of rapid scrutiny, and involuntarily drew such a deep breath of relief that Helen, in her turn, looked enquiringly at *him*. Fernleigh looked slightly pale, but bore no other signs of an exciting vigil. He greeted his brother with calm

serenity, and brightened into real, not assumed cheerfulness when he turned to Miss Grenfell. He had not even lost his appetite; he might, at least, have given *that* token of emotion, and though a little thoughtful was not much more silent than usual. 'After all,' meditated the observer, 'Margaret was not so very wrong in putting him on his mettle. Ghost-hunting seems quite to agree with him, though by Jove! I should not have supposed he would have thought the ghost-*finding* so pleasant!'

When Caryl had done his breakfast he rose.

'"Colin, I am going to my father's room; will you come?'

Collingwood looked at Helen, and read or fancied he read something beseeching in her eyes, that said: 'Stay with me.' Collingwood had the peculiarity (was it a

peculiarity?) of believing that the smallest affairs of his own were more important than the biggest affairs of other people. At present his affair was to make love, or be made love to, so he declined his brother's invitation.

'Have it out with the governor alone, first, old fellow, and send down for me when you want me.'

And Caryl had scarcely closed the door, when the young reprobate threw himself into a chair beside Helen, and drawing her on his knee asked her to give him—no, we will not say what he asked her for, nor whether she complied. Probably she did *not*. Neither will we describe in more detail how Colin exemplified his theory of love-making (though, like most theorists, he considerably modified it in practice), because, not agreeing with his views on that subject, we do not wish to promulgate them. But I

am sorry and ashamed to confess that Helen Grenfell, being weak-minded, appeared cordially to assent to them (with the modifications aforesaid), and never gave one regret to poor Mr. Benson.

Soon however a sound outside, something between a long creak and a heavy shuffle, announced the unfairylike approach of 'Fat Flo.' Her step-daughter flew to the door, to receive her, and make her 'comfortable,' and Colin finding that the private audience was over, was leaving the room when Mrs. Grenfell arrested him.

'Colin, my dear boy, what is this? "Probity" (so she called Mrs. Probert) says, Meredith has been run over by a ghost, or run against it or something, and broken all his arms and legs!'

'I can't stop to tell you now, Aunt Flo. Ask Helen!'

'Me?' said Helen, 'why I have heard nothing at all about it; what is it Colin?'

'Meredith has tumbled off a tree, and hurt himself. There, that'll do, don't bother;' and Collingwood escaped from further enquiries, and took refuge in his father's room.

He found Sir Loys in his invalid's chair, with his gouty foot enveloped in flannels, and an expression of anxiety and uneasiness in his face, which had not sole or chief reference to his diseased limb. He was speaking with some animation:

'But, my dear boy, there may be an *overstrained* delicacy. We can scarcely consider this portfolio as a private possession of Fielding's. Indeed, it is not his at all. It has been publicly advertised in the papers, and may even be considered as a link in the chain of evidence which may throw some

light on Evans' murder. Ah! here's your brother in good time. Collingwood, come and judge. Here is Car'l who demurs to examining the contents of the portfolio you discovered in that strange way last night, on the plea that we have no right to read Mr. Fielding's private papers.'

'Might is right,' answered the unscrupulous Collingwood, and coolly taking the disputed pocket-book from his own pocket, he flung it on the table before Sir Loys. 'You need neither of you read it unless you like. I will tell you what is in it, for I examined it thoroughly before I went to bed last night. It contains merely a signed and attested will made by Morton the millionaire in favour of ——'

'Margaret Fielding of course,' said Sir Loys, 'we know *that* much.'

'No such thing; there is no mention of Miss Margaret—in favour of the late,—he was the present then,—Willoughby Evans, Mr. Morton's clerk.'

'Impossible! Collingwood, you are dreaming; why, what was this fellow to Morton, that he should disinherit his god-daughter for *him*?'

'That I cannot tell you, sir. As for the impossibility, read the paper yourself.' He took the will, and presented it to Sir Loys, and while the baronet was reading it, turned to Caryl. 'This letter-case contained further a packet of letters, addressed to Willoughby Evans; they *may* throw some light on this mystery of the bequest, but I did not open them, for I recognised the handwriting on the address, and thought it was more your affair than mine?' And, so saying, he offered his brother the letters, yellow and

mildewed, which Margaret had formerly written to Evans.

'Thanks,' said Caryl coldly, and he took the letters and placed them, without looking at them, in his breast-pocket. 'I know all about these letters, and that they contain no explanation whatever of this mysterious business.'

'There is nothing more in the portfolio.' Sir Loys looked up.

'Fielding must be an awful liar. He has repeatedly assured me that his daughter was his cousin's sole heiress, and all the while he was cognisant of this iniquitous will!'

'But,' said Caryl, 'the will is in favour of a man who has long been dead. Possibly, he only thought it necessary to speak of Mr. Morton's *present* intentions?'

'His present intentions, it is well known,

are to leave the bulk of his property to charities, if this very portfolio is not forthcoming.'

'It is forthcoming now,' said Collingwood, 'so I suppose we may congratulate Margaret; but what could have been Fielding's motive for hiding it like an old magpie?'

'And how did it come in his possession at all,' said Sir Loys; 'there is some very unpleasant mystery here.'

'Not at all,' said Caryl, 'I think it can very easily be explained. When the body was taken to the Manor House, Fielding probably took charge of the letter-case as a *private* possession of his cousin's; and, in his distress and excitement, subsequently forgot all about it.'

'What was he hiding it for?'

'My dear father, you surely cannot expect

a reasonable explanation of a man's actions in his dreams? Perhaps an attack of somnambulism might have occurred at the time of Evans's death, brought on by the shock; and that would account in a measure for his remembering nothing about this pocket-book since.'

Sir Loys and his younger son exchanged doubtful and dissatisfied glances. Caryl saw them, and resumed with animation:

'What use *could* this paper be to any one when the person was dead who alone had any interest in it. Besides, the will is made by a man who is living still; and Mr. Fielding has himself avowed that he has every interest in discovering and producing it.'

'My feeling is,' said the baronet, 'that Fielding's conduct has not been fair and above board; really, it is very awkward.

I scarcely know what to do, but the connection of this paper with the young man's murder makes it—makes a—a strict investigation necessary. We cannot hush it up among ourselves.'

'There is no need for hushing up,' said Caryl, 'greater seeming mysteries than this could be easily unravelled by a little frankness on all sides. Leave this to me, sir; if I have not cleared it up to your satisfaction in the course of an hour or two, you may take any means you may judge best to elucidate it.'

'You are going to the Manor House?' said Sir Loys, as his son rose. 'Well, I can't go with you, and I can't say I wish I could. You have seen more of Fielding than I have, Caryl; you cannot believe him capable of—I am merely putting a case you know—of committing a serious crime even if he had

an adequate motive, which in this instance certainly does not appear to have existed.'

Fernleigh turned upon his father eyes of horror and astonishment.

'I cannot think it possible, sir, that you would seriously breathe so frightful a suspicion of a friend, a relative of your own. Of course, there is no conceivable motive in this case. Fielding and his clerk were on familiar and friendly terms. He probably was entirely ignorant of his cousin's intentions to make him his heir, until they were finally frustrated. I have found Mr. Fielding a gentle, kindly, amiable man, not remarkable for energy or decision of character; but for that reason alone most unlikely, under any possible temptation, to be guilty of such a ruffianly crime as you impute to him.'

'I impute nothing,' answered the baronet, 'I shall be very glad to have this affair

cleared up, but I fear Fielding will hardly be able to justify himself from the charge of dissimulation. Well, make haste back, boys.'

'And I,' said Collingwood, 'will walk with you part of the way, Car'l, and go to ask how Meredith is getting on.'

But, notwithstanding the pressure of more urgent business, Colin delayed a moment, to speak a farewell word to Helen; and his brother, not sorry in his existing mood to dispense with society, slipped away, while the lovers were yet (as Aunt Flo disrespectfully termed it,) 'philandering'; and when Colin ran after him, he had vanished.

CHAPTER X.

TEMPORISING TOM.

'Twere vain to say I honour Mr. Pym,
But still, a fact so strange and perilous
May well demand a fuller explanation.

Strafford.

THE explanation that young Fernleigh proposed demanding from his intended father-in-law had seemed quite a simple natural affair, when he had spoken of it in Sir Loy's chamber; but the nearer he approached the Manor House the more altered and menacing was the character it assumed, and he felt that after all it was by no means

easy or pleasant to challenge a man old enough to be his father to reveal something which he evidently wished to keep secret, on pain of incurring a suspicion,—perhaps even a charge—of frightful guilt. But Caryl was no coward, and feeling, in the depths of his own faithful and loyal nature, that the cruellest insult he could offer his friend would be a reserve that should imply distrust, he never thought of evading the duty he had undertaken, although he did ponder, deeply and anxiously, on the most considerate way of performing it. On arriving at the house he was informed by Harrison, with great solemnity, that his master was very ill, and that his young lady had sent a servant at dawn of day to the railway station, to telegraph for Dr. Winston of Sewbury. While the man was yet speaking Margaret made her appearance at the

drawing-room door, and beckoned her lover in.

'Oh, Caryl,' she cried, 'I have been watching for you; I am so anxious about papa. I have telegraphed for Dr. Winston.'

'You have done well. Is your father in bed?'

'No, he is up and dressed; I could not persuade him to stay in bed, but he is so restless and feverish.'

Caryl closed the door, and sat down beside her on the sofa.

'Does he know anything,' he asked in a low voice, 'of what passed last night?'

'Not a word. He came home quite steadily, and still sleeping he passed through my dressing-room to his own. I followed him very softly, and locked him in. Of course I went early to take him his coffee and

'Found?' repeated Margaret, tremulously. 'Did *you* find it?—when and where?'

'We will talk of that later. At present, I must see Mr. Fielding. Will you announce me?—or may I venture up alone?' But before she could reply, her father himself entered.

'Harrison brought me word that you were here, Fernleigh,' he said, 'and I was determined that my little girl should not have the whole charge of entertaining you, though it is not a charge that presses very heavily on her—eh? Margaret.'

He spoke cheerfully, but seemed weak, for as he shook hands with Caryl he sank heavily into a seat, with an air of lassitude. Caryl bent down towards Miss Fielding, and whispered:

'Excuse me, Margaret, I must be alone with your father.'

She looked rebellious, and did not move; so he spoke aloud:

'I must beg a few moments' conversation with you alone—*alone*, sir; I have to speak on topics unfit for a lady's ear. Forgive me this once for banishing you from your own drawing-room, Miss Fielding; I will never offend so again.'

'It is something new for you to offend at all,' said Fielding, looking surprised and interested; 'some magistrates' business, perhaps?'

'I suppose,' said the young lady, a little piqued, 'that your privacy will be sufficiently secured by my retiring into the conservatory. I cannot hear you there, but I can see through the glass door when you rise to go, papa must not be left alone.'

Caryl replied by opening the door of the conservatory for her, and as she passed

through it, she paused, and looking up at him, with a half deprecating smile, said :

'I would thank you for your compliance with my whim, in that unlucky promenade last night; but I cannot flatter myself that the effort cost you much after all.'

'The time has not yet come,' replied her lover gravely, 'that we can reckon the cost of what you are pleased to call a *whim*. I wish that it could fall only on *me*.'

'Ah!' she said to herself, as the door closed on her, 'he is thinking of Meredith. Poor Meredith, I forgot to ask after him; how unfeeling he must think me. Caryl is very odd to-day.'

Meantime, the young man had returned to Mr. Fielding, and drew a chair to his side.

'I have to ask your forgiveness, sir,' he began, 'for taking strange freedoms in

your house last night; but I believe Miss Fielding is invested with full powers to act as your vice-regent, is she not? And in that case, I am not so much to blame.'

'What can you mean?' enquired the merchant, with some curiosity; 'what can you all have been about?'

Thereupon Caryl began to narrate their nocturnal expedition, but his hearer soon interrupted him.

'You were silly young people, all of you, to go out on such a wild-goose chase; you would catch nothing but colds and neuralgia. Meredith and I had already watched for the idle fellow who, I suppose, has been playing this unfeeling prank; but he was too wary to let us catch him, and of course your search would be as fruitless!'

'Pardon me, we *did* catch him.'

'Ah! indeed! and who was it then, after all?'

'It was —— a somnambulist.'

Fielding raised himself in his chair, and stared eagerly at his companion.

'You don't say so! That's very singular; very remarkable. What could a somnambulist be doing in such a place as that?—at such an hour too?'

Caryl looked down, and spoke with significant emphasis.

'It is difficult to assign a motive for a dreamer's actions. He might have been impelled to visit the spot by the impression made on him by the painful occurrence there last autumn; it was close to the Beech Coppice. But he was apparently influenced by other associations, which only *you* can explain.'

'I?' repeated Mr. Fielding, in astonish-

ment; then, meeting the young man's expressive look, he half rose to his feet: 'Good God! surely you don't mean to say that *I* was the sleep-walker?'

Caryl hoped that the worst was now over; he seemed infinitely amazed, but neither alarmed nor shocked.

'Tell me all about it, Fernleigh; I never did such a thing since I was a boy at school —at least not that I know of. My wife would have found it out if I had done it in her lifetime. It is a sign of ill-health, a very bad sign. I must speak to Dr. Winston about it. Tell me how it was?'

Thus urged, Caryl proceeded to relate every detail of the night's adventure, to which his hearer listened with eager curiosity, until he described the sleep-walker's halt under the old oak tree, and his mys-

terious gesture there. Then Mr. Fielding turned deadly pale, and Fernleigh stopped.

'Go on,' he murmured faintly, 'tell me all!'

'There is nothing more to tell. Having concealed the object you took from the first tree, you turned back. Your daughter followed, to see you safe home, and send help for Meredith, who is, I fear, very gravely injured by his fall.'

Mr. Fielding passed his handkerchief over his face, on which stood cold drops of weakness or terror.

'Tell me,' he said feebly, 'did you, did you ——?'

Caryl understood the question.

'I did,' he answered; 'they are in my possession now.'

'They, what are they?'

'The will of Mr. Morton and a packet

of letters addressed to Mr. Willoughby Evans.'

Mr. Fielding sank back in his chair, with a low groan. Caryl sprang to the conservatory.

'Quick, Margaret, your father is fainting; do not call in the servants.'

She uttered no word, but flew to her father's side, and raised him in her arms, while her lover, in his anxiety, threw a vase of water, with flowers in it—flowers and all—into his face. He opened his eyes, shook himself free from his daughter's embrace, and sat up, crying in a feeble, senile whine:

'I know nothing about them, I don't know how they came there; I shall be suspected; I shall be accused of the murder itself; I have always been in fear of that.'

'Papa!' cried Margaret, 'dearest papa, do not talk so wildly, as if so hideous a

charge could ever be brought against *you.*'

But her father pushed her away fretfully.

'Why, girl,' he answered, 'you have suspected Caryl for months, on precisely similar evidence. She did, Fernleigh. What wonder if I have lived in continual terror of such suspicion resting on *me*?'

Margaret had raised her hand, with an involuntary gesture, as if to arrest her father's indiscreet revelation. But it was too late. Caryl's serious eyes dwelt a moment upon hers, with a bewildered questioning look, into which there gradually stole an expression of pained intelligence and deep reproach. And her heart sank within her like a stone. But he did not speak, and the silence appeared to her to last for ages. At length he turned to her father, and said, soothingly:

'I am here, sir, to ask your explanation of the circumstances which placed these papers in your possession. I have no doubt at all that any seeming mystery can be easily cleared up by perfect frankness on your part. I ask your confidence as a friend, in my father's name as well as my own.'

The merchant gave a piteous wail, like a chidden child.

'I was a fool,' he said, 'a wretched imbecile idiot; but it was for your sake, Fernleigh, for Margaret's and yours.'

'*What* was for my sake? what have you done?'

The merchant answered the question with another.

'Have you read the papers?'

'I have read Morton's will, the others, (with a glance at Margaret's downcast and flushing cheek) the others, no one has

read; nor shall read while I can prevent it. Indeed, from their damp and mildewed condition it would be difficult to decipher them, I should say.'

Another pause. She felt that the young man, ever generous and delicate, was trying to reassure her about those wretched letters. Had she deserved his consideration?

He resumed!

'Now, my dear sir, put it within my power to explain this singular complication, and to spare you the humiliation of any closer enquiry. Trust *me*; me on whom you have—on whom you *had*—almost a father's claim to respect and sympathy.'

That change of tense from the present to the past was so slight, with the pause that emphasized it, that Fielding never noticed it, but to Margaret it bore a full significance. Amid all her surprise, dismay,

and perplexity at this strange scene, she felt that a chasm had suddenly yawned between her lover and her—a chasm that she could never bridge over. But Fielding, calmed and reassured by Caryl's gentleness, had recovered himself a little, and prepared to respond to his appeal.

'I have been a cowardly fool, Fernleigh; but my folly can be easily explained. That cursed will of Morton's! All his wealth, thrice told, would not repay me for what I have suffered on account of it. The evening poor Evans was murdered I had received a telegram, dispatched after he had left town, announcing my cousin's seizure by paralysis. He was not expected to survive an hour. I went to meet Evans at the station, to communicate this intelligence to him, and came upon his stiffening corpse, lying among the fern and brushwood in the Coppice. Having

surmounted the first shock of surprise and horror, and satisfied myself that life was totally extinct, I was turning away to give the alarm, when I saw that letter-case lying on the grass ; dropped there probably by the assassin, who had forced it open in quest of gold or notes. I picked it up, almost mechanically, and was hurrying through the wood when the thought flashed upon me that if, as was possible, Morton had died but an hour before Evans, the poor fellow's *heirs* would inherit my cousin's princely fortune, if the will was couched in the terms that Morton had stated to me in his letter of the previous day, and if the paper was duly executed. I paused to reflect. It was most *iniquitous* of Morton thus to transfer my child's inheritance to strangers. I unfolded the parchment, and tried to read it, but there was not light enough for that, and

it *might* have been a mere threat of my cousin's after all. I dared not take the portfolio home, for fear of an enquiry being instituted for the papers found upon the body; and obeying the impulse of the moment—I was, remember, greatly excited—I replaced the will and those letters in the portfolio, and concealed it in the cavity of a tree near which I was standing. When the search was over for evidences of the murder I went to my *cache*, intending to restore the portfolio and its contents to my cousin, who was recovering from his illness, but they had disappeared, and I never saw them again.'

'You must have risen in your sleep, under the influence of strong excitement, and removed them to another hiding-place, precisely as we saw you doing last night?'

'I suppose it was so. The misfortune was,

that Morton suspected that I had destroyed his imbecile will, and took it in such ill part that I dared not (for Margaret's sake, you understand) confess the little I knew of it. And worse than this, Meredith the keeper had seen me concealing it in the wood. He mistook me for *you*, and the inference both he and my daughter drew from this supposed fact was such, that I dared not—not even to justify *you*—acknowledge my share in it.'

Again Caryl bent a slow gaze on Margaret, and again her eyes and her heart fell down low, beneath it.

'I confess I have been wrong throughout, very wrong; but it was for Margaret's sake. How could I tell that Morton would recover, and keep up his insane whim, when no one could possibly profit by it? I trust, Fernleigh, that you do not think I meant any *real* knavery? No heir of Evans' could

have the slightest right in *justice* to my relative's magnificent fortune.'

Caryl was spared the necessity of expressing any opinion on the subject by the entrance of the footman, who presented him with a very crumpled note on a silver salver.

'Dr. Winston is below, Miss,' he said, addressing Margaret, 'and the carriage was told to wait, to take Mr. Fernleigh to the Lodge.'

'To the Lodge?' said Mr. Fielding, nervously. 'What for?—what's it all about, Caryl?'

But Caryl only replied, briefly:

'My brother is there and has sent for me. I will call again when he has done with me, and meantime there is Dr. Winston waiting to see you.' And with a cold salutation to the young lady, he hurriedly quitted the room.

CHAPTER XI.

IN AT THE DEATH.

To each his sufferings, all are men
Condemned alike to groan:
The tender, for another's pain,
Th' unfeeling for his own. GRAY.

WHEN the younger Fernleigh reached the gamekeeper's lodge he found the man's wife at the door, looking anxiously into the road.

'You haven't heard anything of Dr. Winston, sir?' she asked, curtsying; 'they tell me he was telegraphed for early this morning, and I've made bold to wait for

him here, as he comes from the station to master. My Tom is dreadful bad. Mr. Foster sent word he had 'a case,' and would look in in an hour or so; but he's not been yet. I thought, Mr. Collingwood, that Tom would have died last night, he was so dreadful bad.'

'The train was in a few minutes ago,' answered Colin; 'I heard the whistle. Is the carriage sent to the station to meet Winston?'

'Yes, sir, it's gone; and Morris promised me he'd pull up as he came back, and let the doctor down.'

'Well, stop here and watch for him, and I'll go up to your husband.'

The man was lying quite motionless on the mattress, where the servants had placed him when they had carried him in. It even seemed to Collingwood that his attitude

was unchanged. He was not undressed, but his wife had spread a blanket over him, to keep him from the cold; and his face was so sunken and grey that Colin thought he was dead, till he opened his eyes and looked at him.

'Meredith, my lad, are you in pain?'

He answered, in a low hoarse tone:

'Nay, nay, pain's a'most over now; I've had no pain to speak of since daybreak, but I suffered mortial till then!'

'Then you are better now?'

The patient grinned a ghastly smile.

'I'll never be no worse! I guess, Master Colin, he's been and done it as knowed how.'

'He; who has done it?'

'The ghost; Mr. Willerby's ghost. Well, he's taken it out of me. I don't owe him nowt!'

'There was no ghost, Tom. Don't bother your brains with such stuff. It was only a trick; we've found it out.'

The man rolled his hollow eyes towards the speaker, but without turning his head, and replied:

'Trick here, trick there; maybe you didn't see him; it was *me* he come for. *I* seed him plain enough; he kep his eyes on me as I sat in the branches, and them eyes struck me down like a flash of lightning. I'll never stand up no more.'

'Nonsense; you have perhaps broken your leg. Dr. Winston will be here in a moment with Foster, and you'll be set to rights.'

'Mr. Colin, it's not my leg that's broken, it's *my spine*. I reckon there's no mending *that*!'

Collingwood shuddered involuntarily.

'How do you know it is your spine?'

'I knowed it by the torture last night, when you lifted me. I knew a lad once as broke his spine. He suffered dreadful for an hour or two, then he went quite deadly, like a heel when you've broke its back, and he died up'ards, by degrees, as I am dying now.'

'I hope it is not so bad as that; but if you think you are in danger, would you like me to fetch the clergyman to pray with you?'

'Praying ain't no good,' answered Meredith, doggedly, 'he comed to take me to hell, and I've got to go.'

Collingwood was a little dismayed at this confident assertion, but after looking silently at the sufferer for a minute, he said suddenly:

'Has he any reason to be so fond of your company that he can't make himself com-

fortable in hell without it? Perhaps he is in heaven?'

'No, he isn't, or he wouldn't trouble to leave it. Only damned ghosts walk.'

'They'd only come back to settle their affairs. What do you know of Mr. Evans' affairs?'

'Maybe I know more nor many does.'

'Tell all you know, then, Meredith; and no ghost can have anything more to say to you, in this world or the next.'

Collingwood made this assertion with a confidence proportionate to his ignorance of any grounds on which to rest it; but his philosophy of the supernatural seemed unanswerably convincing to the keeper, who lay silent for awhile, and then said:

'Maybe, if I tell all I know, he won't be let to worry me no more? Mr. Colin, if I tell who killed Mr. Evans, will you promise that your brother will never swear agin my

son, if he ever comes back to England, when I'm gone?'

Colin hesitated.

'If it was your son,—' he began, but the man interrupted him impatiently.

'Give a dog a bad name, and hang him. It warn't my son.'

'Then,' rejoined the unscrupulous Collingwood, 'I'll promise.'

Just then the sound of carriage wheels was heard. Meredith muttered something indistinctly, and said louder:

'It can't do no harm, it may do me good, and make me sleep sounder nor *he* do.'

The carriage stopped at the gate, and Dr. Winston descended. Colin ran past him into the kitchen, and tearing a leaf from an old ledger that lay on the table, hastily scrawled a line, in pencil, and went out to the servant who was driving the brougham.

'Morris, when the doctor comes out, drive to the house like fury, and send up this note to my brother, who is with your master; it's life and death, remember!'

The man touched his hat.

'Shall I wait with the horses, sir, and drive Mr. Fernleigh here?'

'If you can drive faster than he can walk through the Coppice?'

'I think I can, sir.'

'Do so, then.'

The doctor came out, looking very grave. Colin drew him aside.

'Is it danger, doctor?'

'It is death!' answered Dr. Winston; 'the spine is fractured, the lower limbs already paralysed; his hours, nay his moments, are numbered.'

'Can nothing be done to relieve him?'

'Absolutely nothing; but he suffers no

pain now, and will suffer none to the last.'

'Then for God's sake, doctor, hurry on to the House, and send Caryl here at once. Drive like the very devil, Morris.'

The carriage had scarcely disappeared when Mr. Foster, the parish doctor, arrived, and looked a little disappointed to find that he had so narrowly missed the chance of a 'consultation' with the great Sewbury physician. While he went in to Meredith, Colin employed himself first in inventing an imperative order from Dr. Winston that Mrs. Meredith should immediately hasten to the Manor House for some particular wine for the patient; and having thus got her out of the way, he proceeded to collect some writing materials for the keeper's deposition, which he rightly supposed to be of importance, though he had no suspicion of

whom it was likely to inculpate. Mr. Foster then rejoined him, looking even graver than Dr. Winston had done.

'The poor fellow tells me, Mr. Collingwood, that he has a very important secret to reveal. I see you are preparing to take notes of it. There is no time to be lost; he may become speechless at any moment. Can I be of any use as a witness?'

'Thanks,' said Colin, 'I have sent for my brother, but he may be detained, or have left the Manor. If you can spare the time?'

'I can spare all the time that poor Meredith will have to tell his story in—but here is the carriage, bringing back Mr. Fernleigh.'

'Bravo, Morris,' cried Colin, as the coachman pulled up his steaming horses, 'you've won a race against time! Meredith is dying, Car'l, and has something to say first, and Dr.

Foster says he may be speechless at any moment. So come along; be sharp!'

Caryl followed his brother and the doctor into the dying man's room, but not 'sharp' by any means. He went in slowly and quietly, and the keeper's eyes turned on him as he entered, with a ghastly recognition.

'Ha! Mr. Fernleigh,' he muttered; 'in at the death! in at the death! But it's the old fox this time; the cub has run to earth.'

Caryl made no reply. He had been musing as he came along on the strange fatality which had linked him, directly or indirectly, with every great misfortune of this man's life; but he knew his sullen and vindictive nature too well to offer any attempt at sympathy or conciliation. He stood looking sadly and silently down upon him as he spoke again.

'I'm going to tell you what you'd never

have found out for yerselves; but I must leave things straight afore I go. I've seen with my own eyes how dead men are fretted and put about if there's any muddle at the last; so write it all down, Mr. Collingwood. Gentlemen all, it was me, Tom Meredith, as murdered Mr. Evans this time last year.'

Dr. Foster uttered an exclamation of horror, and Caryl turned pale; but Colin wrote it down steadily, and then asked:

'Had you any accomplices? Did any one know you were going to do it?'

'Ne'er a one; I didn't know it myself five minutes afore. Let me alone, to tell it my own way.'

The doctor signed to the young men not to interrupt him, and he went on, still distinctly, but in a lower voice:

'I was hard pressed that day. My boy

had sent me word that the police were close on his tracks, and he wanted money to pay his passage in a ship that was to sail in a couple of days. I couldn't get the money nohow; Mr. Fielding had promised to try if you, Mr. Fernleigh, would give it me; and I was going up to the Manor House, to see him again about it, when Mr. Evans hollared to me, at the gate, to let him through the wood; he'd just come from the station by an earlier train than he was expected by. I went with him a little way. He was as merry as a grig—he was always lively enough, but that night he was special gay. He'd had good news I reckon. I was turning back, for I saw that now he was come Mr. Fielding would put me off, when, says he, "You must see me safe through the Coppice, Tom, for I'm a rich man now, and worth taking care of." I thought

he meant that he had money about him for Mr. Fielding, and says I, "How much may you be carrying, Master?" He laughs, and says, "More than you can count, Tom; I've more money on me than would buy up those beggarly Fernleighs out and out." Then the thought came to me quite sudden, "If I could get that money, my Jem would be sent safe over seas, and set up like a gentleman on the other side; and why should my boy want,—be hanged for the want,—of what I could get for a blow?" Well, I walked alongside of him a little way further, till we came to the Beechen Coppice. I knew there was no one there, nor like to be till after the family dinner, for the servants would be busy till then. He chatted away, but I only heard that devil's whisper at my ear.'

Here he stopped, as if musing, while

his awe-struck listeners stood silent around him. He resumed:

'Arter all, it was through that I got my Jem away; and if he'd stayed here, he'd ha' been hanged by this. My son's life is worth as much as other men's sons,' when all's said.'

'Do you not repent, wretched man?' asked Caryl.

'Repent be d——d!' replied the criminal surlily; 'repent yourself; you killed my eldest son, for no good to nobody.'

Caryl drew back, decidedly 'snubbed,' and Meredith went on.

'I had a life-preserver in my pocket, that I carried most nights when the poachers were like to be about. He walked a step before me, and I knew where to hit—one blow did it. I didn't need to strike a second.'

Again he stopped; but soon went on again.

'I was a'most sorry for him, too; he was a fine figure of a man, and not much older than Jem; but my boy afore other men's boys. I hadn't no time to pity him. I searched him all over for the money he said he carried about him; there was nothing but a kind of silver pocket-book. I thought it had gold or notes in it, but I forced the lock with my knife, and there were only some letters and a parchment—some chap's will; I made that out. There was no money upon him. He'd been chaffing me; the money he boasted of had been left him in that will, may be; but there was nothing of no use to *me*. He'd paid his life for his joke, and I'd risked my neck! and nobody the better for it after all.'

'Serve you right, you scoundrel!' cried Collingwood, indignantly.

The man slowly turned upon him eyes over which a filmy glaze was gathering, but took no further notice of the reproach. The doctor interposed.

'This is the main subject of the deposition. Let him sign it at once; I must be off.'

He could not raise his arm, but with some difficulty, assisted by the young men, the deposition was duly signed and witnessed, when he lay still as if exhausted; but when the doctor had taken his leave he opened his eyes, and looked once more at Caryl.

'After all, Mr. Fernleigh, it was the money I got for *your* secret that paid Jem's passage.'

'*My* secret?' repeated the young man.

'Aye, your father-in-law, as is to be, paid me for it as hush-money, I know. He did

not know as a man can't be killed twice over, and he thought you'd done it.'

'You are mistaken, Meredith; it was Mr. Fielding himself you saw.'

'What does he mean?' said Colin. 'What are you talking of, Meredith?'

'Mr. Fielding, was it? It's no concern of mine. I went home after that business was done, and round by the road to the Manor House. I stopped to chat with the servants, and then back again near the Coppice. I lingered among the trees, making believe to set my traps. I wanted to see who'd first find the body. If nobody passed by I meant to give the alarm myself, and then I saw you. Mr. Fielding was it? It's no concern of mine, anyhow, but it was worth fifty pounds to me; and it was your diamond ring he had on too.'

He spoke in a hoarse rambling way, and

Collingwood glanced at his brother, over whose face passed an expression of bitter pain, but as he was about to speak the voice of Mrs. Meredith was heard at the door, talking to the wife of the lodge-keeper at the Manor House, and Caryl turned away.

'I must go back to Mr. Fielding. Colin, do you go to Sir Loys. I will be with you very shortly; there is nothing more to be done *here*.'

For over the features of the dying ruffian a grey shadow was slowly creeping.

CHAPTER XII.

TOO LATE.

Ah, sister, desolation is a delicate thing!
It walks not on the earth, it floats not in the air,
But it treads with silent footstep, and it fans with silent wing
The tender hopes that in their hearts the best and gentlest bear;
Who, lulled to soft repose by the fanning wings above,
And the music-stirring motion of those soft and busy feet,
Dream visions of aerial joy, and call the phantom, Love,
And wake to find the spectre, Pain, like that which now we greet! SHELLEY.

THE butler, Harrison, admitted Caryl on his return to the Manor House, and looked wistfully at him.

'I beg pardon, sir,' he said, hesitatingly,

but Morris says Meredith is very badly hurt?'

'He is dying, Harrison.'

The man seemed startled and shocked.

'It was a bad night's work you made of it, I'm afraid, Mr. Fernleigh?'

'It was, indeed,' answered the young man, moodily. 'Is Dr. Winston in your master's room?'

'No, sir; master is in the drawing-room still with Miss Fielding. He said he would wait there till you came back; the doctor is taking lunch in the dining-room.'

Thither Caryl repaired, and found Dr. Winston busily demolishing a game-pie. If his eyes only, questioned the visitor, it was probably because his mouth was full. The visitor answered the eyes.

'I left him still living, but speechless, and I think unconscious.'

'Ah, the paralysis is creeping up; he is probably dead now. Take a glass of wine, Fernleigh. That's right; you look jaded; you never *could* stand this sort of thing. You would never have done for a medical man's work.'

'How did you find Fielding?'

'There's a great deal of irritation about him, but it is chiefly nervous—some inflammatory action about the heart, I fear. Has he been worried about anything lately?—money affairs, for instance?'

'He has been worried, but about an affair that will now, I hope, be settled.'

'Ah, well, the sooner the better; he couldn't stand much more. I hope your present business with him is not of an exciting nature? If it is, you had better postpone it.'

'It will, I hope, be rather soothing than exciting; and ——'

'Mr. Fielding begs Mr. Fernleigh to walk up *immediately*.'

The peremptory message was delivered with due emphasis, and Caryl rose to obey it, only pausing to say:

'Can you spare my father an hour before you go back to town? He is very complaining to-day.'

'I'll go with you if Fielding will lend us the carriage. You won't stop here long, will you?'

'I'll be with you in half an hour. You will dine at the Park; and we'll send you to meet the last train.'

Caryl found Mr. Fielding anxious and excited, and hastened to relate to him, as briefly as possible, the substance of the gamekeeper's confession, to which he

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The man seemed startled and shocked.

'It was a bad night's work you made of it, I'm afraid, Mr. Fernleigh?'

'It was, indeed,' answered the young man, moodily. 'Is Dr. Winston in your master's room?'

'No, sir; master is in the drawing-room still with Miss Fielding. He said he would wait there till you came back; the doctor is taking lunch in the dining-room.'

Thither Caryl repaired, and found Dr. Winston busily demolishing a game-pie. If his eyes only, questioned the visitor, it was probably because his mouth was full. The visitor answered the eyes.

'I left him still living, but speechless, and I think unconscious.'

'Temporising Tom' was at his old evasive tricks again, but he could not escape.

'Now,' said Fernleigh, gently but very resolutely, 'and I will never more allude to the subject. You told me that your daughter has suspected *me* of this crime of assassination. What grounds had she for so strange an accusation?'

'Not so very strange,' answered Mr. Fielding peevishly, '*somebody* did it, you know; and since the right person was not suspected, any one was liable to whom any sort of motive could be ascribed.'

'Motive? What was supposed to be my motive?'

If Caryl would only have addressed *her*; if he would only have looked at *her*, she might then have broken the spell by which she seemed held silent and motionless; but he went on as if he had been unconscious of

her presence. Mr. Fielding answered his questions slowly and reluctantly, as a clairvoyant might have done.

'Meredith it was who tried to implicate you; he saw your quarrel with Evans in the wood; no one knew of it but himself.' Then, with a sudden misgiving, 'That was true, wasn't it?'

'Quite true,' answered Caryl coldly, 'Evans and I quarrelled, as you say, and he knocked me down. He was much stronger than I am; and when a strong man knocks a weak one down, the weak one always murders him—in novels.'

Caryl's strangely altered tone struck Mr. Fielding with consternation. He began to think things were going very wrong.

'But, indeed, Fernleigh, you must forgive Margaret. The silly girl has fretted enough about it. Meredith saw me conceal that

portfolio—in the dark he mistook me for you. I had your ring on by ill luck, and he recognised that in the moonlight.'

'My ring?'

'Yes, I had it from Margaret to return to you.'

'Ah!' This time he looked at Margaret, but she was not any the better for the look. Turning again to Mr. Fielding, 'And knowing, as you did, that I was not even in the Coppice at that time, you yet suffered ——'

'You must forgive *me* too, Caryl. My foolish impulsive act seemed to bear so hideous a significance in the eyes of those who knew it—and supposed it to be yours—that I really shrank from avowing it; it has done you no harm, it could do *you* none. "All's well that ends well;" it was for Margaret's sake and yours.'

'Plead your daughter's interest if you will,

sir,' said Caryl haughtily, but in the view you have taken of it it can never be identified with *mine*. Here,' throwing the portfolio on the table, 'are the papers that you have thought worth possessing yourself of in such a manner; let us end the conversation.'

'It will be best,' replied the invalid feebly; 'it has been rather too much for me. I will go to my own room'

Caryl's conscience smote him, that he had forgotten the doctor's warning. He rang the bell for Mr. Fielding's servant, and offering his arm to the old man—grown old so suddenly—he led him carefully and tenderly, as a son might do, to the door where the valet was in waiting for him. He looked after him pityingly, as he tottered rather than walked to his own chamber; then he closed the door and went and stood upon the hearth-rug, looking down silently on the

criminal who sat there waiting for her judge.

She had never moved nor stirred, but sat as if turned to stone, her eyes bent upon the little dog that lay at her feet, but which might have suddenly changed into a tiger, without her noticing it much. She was listening for her doom. But what need of speech? —she had read all that he could say in the cold bitterness of his accents, in the alienated scrutiny of his look. He would *never* forgive her. So she sat waiting, her lips compressed, her brows knitted, with a steady endurance that her lover (with a man's natural obtuseness—they *are* so stupid, poor things) mistook for unfeeling insensibility; and that thought gave an additional hardness to his manner when at length he spoke.

'Am I cleared *now*, Margaret? Do I stand acquitted in your eyes of the foul guilt

of a secret assassination?—or am I still on my trial? And having found that I did not commit this crime, must you wait a little longer before you can pronounce me in*capable* of having committed it?'

Margaret said nothing; she bowed her head still lower, as if to let the storm of reproach sweep over it.

If men seldom get the privilege of having 'the last word,' they generally make the most of it, when they do; and Caryl was apparently no exception to this rule. But the freezing pitiless severity of his voice told even more than his bitter words how deep was his just resentment.

'For months,' he continued, 'you have been my promised wife; I have given you a man's true and entire affection, without concealment, without reserve; and you have repaid it with the disloyalty of secret suspicion,

of base and treacherous espial. Believing that my life held the consciousness of a fearful cowardly crime, you have laid wait to surprise its confession in the tenderness of unguarded intimacy. You have watched my words, my looks, my gestures, to trace in them all a guilty memory which only *you* could ever dream of finding there. It was an ungracious task for a young girl, and one that demanded a more practised intellect than yours, and perhaps an even colder heart.'

Still she did not speak. She was yearning with a frantic yearning to throw herself on his bosom, aye, even at his feet, and implore him for his pardon, for his love. But she could not do it. The restraints of habit and education are stronger than passionate impulse in a modest and delicate nature, such as Margaret's was with all its faults and

follies; and so Caryl saw nothing and suspected nothing of the tempest of grief and repentance that surged within her. He proceeded:

'Let us end this conversation (the conversation had been a soliloquy, but in his angry excitement he had not noticed that)—let us end *everything*. Had I proved guilty, you must have restored me my plighted faith. Proved innocent, I restore yours to *you*.'

Of course. Margaret had seen all along that *that* was to be the conclusion of the whole matter; she knew that remonstrance would be unavailing, and that she had deserved it. But though she could not appeal against the sentence, she would not acquiesce in it. She sat quite silent, her fingers unconsciously grasping the paper the dying murderer had signed, her eyes rivetted on little

Frisk, on whose back her foot was abstractedly tracing an imaginary pattern. Frisk was the only one of the trio who seemed thoroughly to enjoy himself, and evidently considered the whole affair as a personal compliment to him.

Mr. Fernleigh waited a little after his last speech—he must have been rather out of breath; but receiving no reply, he started off afresh:

'Give what colouring you choose before the world to our altered relations. I shall neither dispute nor deny any version you or your father may think proper to give. For that paper (taking it from her listless hand), it will, of course, be laid before the proper authorities, that no *other* innocent person may henceforth be suspected—*even* by the woman who may have promised him her love. It contains no allusion to Mr. Fielding's

ill-advised attempt to conceal the portfolio; and although the enquiry into the cause of Meredith's sudden death must necessarily make public last night's unfortunate adventure, your father's share in it need hardly be alluded to. It will be a consolation to know that he will be spared much ill-natured and gossiping comment. I am the only witness who could prove what he will wish to be kept private.'

She glanced up anxiously.

'I fear,' she faltered forth, 'that your evidence must in some measure ——'

'I shall give no evidence; it will not be needed. My brother's and Dr. Winston and Foster's will be sufficient. To-morrow I leave Fernleigh;—perhaps for years.'

Once more silence. When he again addressed her, the harsh constraint and bitterness of his former tone had changed,

and the rich melody of his voice had its old softened cadence.

'Farewell—farewell for ever, Margaret. You have youth, beauty, and wealth; you will have trains of suitors from whom to select one more fitted, in a worldly sense, for your alliance than *I* have ever been. I have had so little to offer you that could be of any worth in *your* eyes!'

The returning gentleness of his manner gave her courage, and she timidly slipped her hand in his, as, bending towards her, he laid it on the arm of her chair. She, the proud, self-reliant, undemonstrative Margaret, who had hitherto so rarely permitted the shyest caress. Too late! Margaret, too late! He held the delicate hand a moment. What gentleman could do less? Then dropped it gently, but with no answering pressure. Ah, in that light touch he had failed to re-

cognise the passionate tumult of the late awakened heart!

'When you form another and happier engagement, let me entreat you, for your own sake, to honour your husband with *entire* esteem and trust—the trust that is born of love, such love as you never gave, perhaps never *could* give, to *me*. Believe me, no man worthy to win you but will prize the most masculine superiority of wit, genius, or intellect far below one genuine throb of your woman's heart.'

When she lifted her eyes, at length, she knew that his place at her side was vacant, that the sunlight and springtime of her life had passed away from it with him. What had he said about genius and intellect? Could she but regain her hold on his affections, she would care as little for the gifts on which she once prided herself as the brooding

cushat cares for the purple sheen of her plumage! Oh, vanquished Margaret! have you fallen so low as *that*? And she sat motionless, when he had quitted her, listening to his retreating footstep, trying to bring back the lingering tenderness of his accent. How long and how often would she hearken, in her loneliness, to those inward echoes of a silenced music! Oh, dreary heart echoes! like the wail of ocean in the stranded sea-shell—of the voice, of the step, we shall hear no more for ever!

CHAPTER XIII.

LEFT ALONE.

God! Thou art love! I build my faith on that.
Even as I watch beside thy tortured child,
Unconscious whose warm tears fall fast on him,—
So doth Thy right hand guide us through the world
Wherein we stumble. *Paracelsus.*

Miss Marston was not a little dismayed, when in the midst of her London engagements she was surprised by a visit from her 'eldest boy.' He could not leave England, he said, without bidding her adieu—as his absence would be certainly for months, and probably for years. Of course Mabel imme-

diately comprehended that his engagement with Miss Fielding was broken off, but she was too discreet to attempt to force from him a confidence that he seemed disinclined to bestow, and made up her mind to wait patiently for the explanation from Margaret, who, she was certain, would not long withhold it from her. She consoled herself too with the reflection that since the young people had failed to understand each other, during twelve months of daily intercourse, a temporary separation might do them no harm. Each might read the other's character more truly in perspective, as we hold a sketch a little distance from us, to judge of it more perfectly. And a year's travelling would do young Fernleigh an immensity of good, by enlarging the sphere of his social experience and widening the current of personal thought and feeling.

The next day's post brought the expected letter from Margaret, but it was very brief. Miss Fielding confirmed her friend's suspicion that 'all was over' between herself and Caryl, but assured her (quite unnecessarily) that the young man was blameless in the matter; that she had deserved (there was a great blot just there)—but would defer entering into particulars until Miss Marston's return home. Whereupon Queen Mab hastily concluded her business arrangements, postponed *sine die* all projects of visiting and amusement, and hastened back to Hartsknoll.

Margaret told her everything without reserve, and Mabel looked graver and graver, until the confession closed with the report of the last interview between the sometime lovers.

She had expected nothing worse than

some wayward exhibition of petulance and self-will, that might effect a temporary estrangement, but make no irreparable breach. But an affianced husband suspected—and of such a crime! Caryl Fernleigh, too, of all men in the world! She would herself have found it hard to forgive Margaret this wrong, had she not avowed it so frankly, and so penitently admitted both the justice and the severity of her punishment. So Mabel forgave her, but could hold out no hope that Caryl would ever do so.

Whether the family at the Park would have been less placable is more than doubtful, had they known all the circumstances of the rupture; but Mr. Fernleigh having announced the termination of his engagement, had declined any further allusion to it, and desired that the Fieldings' names should never be mentioned to him by any of his

correspondents; and of course delicacy forbade them to press the enquiry on Margaret.

Caryl's departure gave the signal for an entire disorganisation of the little society of Hartsknoll. Sir Loys' interest, always rather languid, in the management of his estate failed altogether when his heir and referee quitted him. He found out that both Mrs. Grenfell and himself required mineral baths and a milder climate, to benefit them in rheumatism and gout, and said that he would hasten the marriage of Helen and Collingwood, to leave them in occupation of the Park while he and his sister visited the German springs.

But lawyers are dilatory, and law settlements are prolix. The winter was over, and spring far advanced, before the marriage could take place, and as Caryl refused to return to witness it, the wedding was cele-

brated very quietly in town, and the whole family departed together for Aix. There Sir Loys and Aunt Flo remained, while the bridal pair prolonged their travels on the Continent, and did not come back to Fernleigh until a year had elapsed since their brother first took up his pilgrim staff. That year had closed very sadly for Margaret, nor had its successor any brighter promise for her.

Mr. Morton had died very suddenly; only a few days after the recovery of his lost *portefeuille*, and every shilling of his colossal fortune was left, as he had threatened, to different charitable institutions. The intelligence reached Mr. Fielding while yet labouring under the debility of previous ill-health, and a stroke of paralysis at once prostrated him as utterly as it had formerly prostrated his wealthy relative. Nor was his recovery so rapid or so complete even

as Mr. Morton's had been from his first attack. Very slowly he regained imperfect speech and consciousness, and with impaired strength and weakened intellect he lingered on until a second stroke, and a third, followed each at briefer intervals and with severer results; and after languishing for nearly three years, helpless and imbecile, he expired at Fernleigh Manor in his daughter's arms. From the commencement of his illness he had shown the greatest unwillingness to lose sight of her for a moment; and he grew more and more exacting as his faculties decayed, until at last he would rave with irritability and impatience, when the slightest service was offered him by other hands than hers. And never could Margaret's womanhood assert itself more truly and tenderly than in the unselfish unremitting devotion she paid to

the fretful whining invalid, dearer to her in his helplessness, his entire dependence upon her, than in his brightest days of prosperity and health. All the long winter saw her a prisoner in his sick room, reading to him such light news as still could interest him, playing draughts or backgammon with him, singing to him the simple old-fashioned ballads of his youth—always cheerful, smiling, and hopeful for *him*. And when the spring sunshine came back, and the summer flowers, the old man, ever feebler and more peevish, might be seen leaning on her arm, as she guided his tottering steps up and down the garden walks, while she still humoured his caprices and yielded to his exactions; and thought often sadly, but never spoke, of the lost lover who knew nothing of this heavy trial, whose sympathy would have

been so true, whose support so tender. But when winter and summer came round again, her father's needs became more urgent and pressing, and she had no time to spare for remembrance or regret. She was alone then. Mabel Marston was in town, the Park was only occupied by servants; but in the constant unremitting attention that the sufferer now demanded, she was learning the lesson of the dignity of love, its privilege of elevating and sanctifying the humblest duties and meanest offices of life. And when the end came, and 'the world' was saying what a happy release for his daughter poor imbecile Fielding's death must be, Margaret's tears were fast falling beside the tenantless couch and the empty chair. She was weeping over memories of kindly looks, and words spoken while yet her presence could be

recognised by the dim eyes and failing brain; she was weeping in unmerited self-reproach over the omission or too careless rendering of her little acts of daily tendance. She was weeping as sadly, as passionately, as a mother weeps for the sickly moaning infant, whose loss, unheeded by others, has left the whole world a blank to *her*.

But she was not alone in the village when her father died. Collingwood and his wife were living at the Park then, and Mabel Marston was back in her Cottage. The Fairy Queen often visited Margaret, and her visits were always a comfort to her. At first, when she received a letter from Caryl, Mabel would give it to her to read, but letter after letter came, and never in one was there the slightest enquiry after his lost love—nor even the most distant allusion to her; and Mabel noticed that the girl's eyes would

glance rapidly and wistfully over the closely written pages, in search of her own name; and wander listlessly, or fill with tears, as the search proved ever fruitless, and so she left off showing her the letters, and never spoke of the writer; and Margaret understood the silence, and mournfully acquiesced in it.

Sir Loys always sent her kind and cordial messages. Very possibly, the tidings of Morton's altered will might have diminished in some degree his disappointment at the estrangement of his son from the supposed heiress, but his satisfaction was great that this estrangement had occurred before Morton's death. After all, Margaret was still an heiress. It is not every pretty girl who can bring her husband even a fortune of two thousand a year! Still, when the marriage had been first arranged, her prospects were of as many thousands as she now

possessed hundreds; and the baronet was glad that the ill-natured world would have no excuse for saying that a mercenary disappointment had had any share in influencing Caryl's 'evasion.' Poor innocent Sir Loys! As if the world did not say so all the same.

But Caryl never heard it, and would not have troubled himself if he had. He had gone out of hearing of Hartsknoll and county gossip. He had gone abroad to 'travel,' and travel he certainly did. His performances in that way made the 'seven-leagued boots' seem quite a 'slow' fable, and the Wandering Jew a mere common tramp! He went first to Algiers, to warm himself, Colin said, after the chill of his long betrothal; and then on the principle of the Russian bath, I suppose, he fled northward to the icebergs of Norway. One day he

had been seen at Vienna, the next he was said to be lurking about the Pyramids. He went to Granada, to see the real Alhambra, and then to Morocco to see live Moors. He spent some weeks at Venice and some days at Rotterdam. He 'crossed over' to Corsica, and 'crossed back' again to Lisbon. He travelled on foot, with knapsack and alpenstock. He drifted in barges, and trotted in diligences, and scudded in railway carriages, and used every mode of progression except going in a balloon, or on all fours. He went all over Europe. I am not sure he did not visit Siberia. I am quite sure he visited Sark. At last it occurred to him that he might as well go home.

CHAPTER XIV.

MATCH-MENDING.

Yea, but ye could be very blest
If some ye nearest love were nearest.
Must they not love when lovéd best?
Must ye not happiest love when dearest?
E. B. BROWNING.

'Now, is he not *exquisite*?' And Mrs. Collingwood Fernleigh held forth for Miss Marston's approval a frightful, saffron-coloured baby, that blinked from among its profuse surroundings of lace and muslin, like a crocus from a snowdrift. But Queen Mab did not perpetuate her idolatry from one generation to another. I am afraid she had

the paltry meanness of soul to be jealous of the vantage ground of maternity, from which Helen could exert an influence over Colin, before which hers must for ever 'pale its ineffectual fires.' So that instead of the expected adulation, the reply that the young mother received was:

'My dear, he's simply hideous.'

'I don't care what you say, Mabel; I know you don't really think so. See what a lovely nose he has!'

'That is just his peculiar blemish; no baby under six months old has any right to such a feature; it is as unbecoming to him as a rat's tail would be to a rabbit.'

'Fie! how can you make such disgusting comparisons? But you *do* think him pretty, for you have said he is exactly like Colin.'

'And Colin, when a baby, bore an exact

resemblance to a curried monkey. It is precisely his absurd likeness to his father that disgusts me so. The Fernleighs are addicted to these monotonous stereotypes. Caryl is the image of Sir Loys, and this child is the image of Collingwood. Done in Colin's worst style too. He's a repetition—he's a tautology!'

'May I come in?' proceeded from an apparently bodiless head that projected itself from the half-closed door. 'I heard the silver chime of godma's voice all the way from the second landing; what are you two so excited about?'

'She calls baby *hideous*,' said the aggrieved mamma.

'*Is* he hideous? It must be through some mismanagement of yours, then, Nell, for we Fernleighs were always a handsome family; but, Mab, isn't he a—rather a—*slow*

baby? Ought not he to be more *grown up* by this time?'

'You know nothing about children,' said the young mother, whose superior practical experience was of some six weeks' date. 'He's very big for his age; feel how heavy he gets!'

But Colin drew back from the offered experiment.

'No, dear, I nearly dropped him the other day, and only saved him upside down. He's so,—so *slippery*,—and he's going to bawl, or to be sick, or something!'

A prediction which was fulfilled by baby's setting up a dulcet squall.

'Oh, for heaven's sake, nurse,' cried the distracted father, 'take him away, as far as ever you can go!'

The nurse obeyed, and as the infantine

protest died away in the distance, Miss Marston addressed her godson:

'I wanted you, Colin; I have something to consult you and Helen about.'

'"Consult!" I like that; as if *you* ever asked advice! You never do more than *give* it.'

'And *you* never do less than *take* it. But I want suggestion, not advice.'

'Well?'

'Have you heard from Caryl to-day?'

'No; I suppose *you* have?'

'I have; he wishes to come here for a day or two. Florence's rheumatism is getting so much better at Aix that your father is inclined to keep her there for another month or two to perfect her cure; and he wants Car'l to come down himself to see about those new farm-buildings Everill wants.'

'Well, if he wishes to come what hinders him? The railway is all right, I suppose?'

'Dear Caryl,' said Helen, 'I am so glad! It was such a mere glimpse of him we had at Pau last summer, and he has never visited Fernleigh since he left it, three years ago.'

'But,' said Mabel, 'he is *afraid* to come now.'

'Afraid?' echoed Collingwood, naïvely, 'what of? of the baby?'

'How ridiculous you are, dear! (from Helen) *I* know what you mean, Mabel; he is afraid of meeting Margaret.'

'Why, what harm can Margaret do him?' asked Colin; 'she won't want to marry him against his will, I suppose? nor with it either, perhaps, for I am sure he did not behave well to *her*.'

'You say so now, because you have grown fond of poor Margaret; but you did not take her part at the time; you agreed with Caryl that she had *no heart*.'

'Well, nor had she any—*then*; but it has come since, as you tell me baby's teeth will. Does Car'l tell you he is afraid of coming here on account of Margaret, Mab?'

'Not in so many words; indeed he does not name her. He has never named her, nor permitted me to do so to him, from the day he left Hartsknoll; but he speaks of unwillingness to renew, however distantly, an intercourse that would only revive bitter and useless ——'

'Then,' said Collingwood, 'he had better keep away till Sir Loys and Aunt Flo come back, for Margaret is only waiting to see them safe at home again to leave the Manor House for good. You know she has made

arrangements to join the Roskins at Rome this winter?'

'We need not put Caryl off,' pleaded Helen; 'a word to Margaret would suffice, and he might come and go for a month without any fear of meeting *her*.'

'Exactly,' said Mabel; 'I told him that. And now, what I want of you two is a promise not to say that word, nor let Margaret know that he is coming at all.'

'Oh, you treacherous little intrigante! what do you mean by that?' But Helen's significant glance at her friend told that to *her* the meaning was clear enough.

'What stupid creatures men are!' cried Mabel, boldly; 'don't you see that if Margaret knows Caryl is here she will keep out of his way, and he will not seek her, and so they will never meet again? And they *must* meet—to part no more!'

'I'll have nothing to do with your match-making, Miss Marston; it may turn out a fresh disappointment for the girl, too. How do you know that Caryl has not formed another attachment, and avoids *her* from delicacy?'

Mabel looked a little blank at this suggestion; but she soon rallied.

'This is not match-making, it is only match-*mending*; and if your brother has formed a new attachment, it is still better that Margaret and he should meet and settle their mutual relation on an entirely new basis; that will preclude any chance of future embarrassment. And I am sure if Caryl were reengaged he would have told *me*.'

'Perhaps he has been waiting to communicate the intelligence *viva voce*.'

'Perhaps he has; but I am sure he hasn't. Any way, you will promise not to say a

word about his coming? Not to a soul mind, for if the servants hear it, they will contrive to waft it to Margaret's ears, somehow.'

'I promise,' said Helen, 'for self and partner.'

'That's good of you, my love,' returned the ungracious husband, 'for I am sure I never would engage myself to vouch for any woman's discretion, and could not promise for *you*. When is Car'l to be here, Mab?'

'Oh,' replied the little lady, 'your discretion will not be very severely taxed by a protracted trial; Caryl will be here this evening. I told him, what was perfectly true when I wrote, that Margaret was on a visit to Lady Blake; it was not necessary to write again, to tell him that she came back this evening.'

Helen clasped her hands fervently.

'Oh, I do so hope and trust ——'

'Nelly,' said her lord, 'you are a sad little donkey.'

'I suppose I *am*, dear; you have so often told me so that I am at length impressed with the reality of the fact.'

'Hear her audacity! She actually presumes to make feeble essays at repartee! She is losing all her docility.'

'And what she has lost,' laughed Mabel, 'Margaret has gained. It is your own fault, Colin; you cut all your wheat in the blade, you know, while Caryl's harvest has been ripening.'

'Ah,' sighed Colin, 'Caryl is the Petruchio, and I am the Horatio, on our domestic stage; but I have always been doubtful as to the *permanence* of Katherine's conversion.'

CHAPTER XV.

COME BACK.

Only when wakened to sad truth at last,
The bitterness to come, and sweetness past:
When thou art vext, then turn again and see
Thou hast loved Hope, but Memory loved thee!

HOOD.

IT chanced to be the third anniversary of the day on which Margaret and Caryl had parted, when the returned exile once more planted his foot 'upon his native heath,' or on what was nearly as familiar to him, upon Miss Marston's hearth-rug. During these three years he had twice met Sir Loys and Aunt Flo, and the 'Collingwood Fernleighs'

once at Pau, and once at Aix; but Mabel had not beheld him, and by the intent and eager gaze which she now rivetted on him she seemed trying to compensate herself for the long yearning of that separation. Their correspondence had been unremitting, and except on one point, intimate and unreserved; and she knew that those three years had brought a fuller development to the young man's character; that the activity and variety of travelling life, by opening to him a wider range of observation, and bringing him into contact with minds of a hundred different calibres, habits and forms of thought, had in a great measure corrected the morbid action of a solitary intellect and too keen sensibility. She knew that Caryl's aims were as lofty, his aspirations as earnest, as ever; yet she trembled a little lest his affections should have grown less warm, his sym-

pathy less tender than of old. She did not like the unrelenting severity with which he had forbidden all mention of the Fieldings' name, or the unbending silence with which he had received the slight allusions to them on which she had occasionally ventured. It made her tremble for the hope she had never ceased to cherish, of his reconciliation with Margaret.

As she sat thus musing, in her old familiar attitude, leaning forward with her hands clasped on her lap, gazing wistfully into the young man's face, the change she saw there scarcely reassured her. Caryl's physical, no less than his mental, health had been established and strengthened by his years of travel. He had lost the almost fragile delicacy of form that he once possessed, and now nearly rivalled Collingwood in width of shoulder and depth of chest, while there was a firm

elasticity in his gait, very different from its former listless languor. Nor had he now the 'vacant face' of which Georgie had professed herself an admirer. His lips were fringed with a long silky moustache, so that Queen Mab could not, as she used to do, look to the sensitive mouth for the expression of emotion that he would fain have hidden. That moustache was a sufficient veil, and Mabel would have given much that day for a permission to cut it off—although he looked so handsome with it, that having read all she wanted in his features, she would have wished to stick it on again. His forehead was calm, and whiter for the browner tint that foreign airs had left on his cheek, and the darkened shade of his hair. Then his eyes! Mabel's hopes revived when she looked into his eyes, so clear, so frank, so tender; there was no change in *them*.

'Are not you satisfied yet with your scrutiny?' he asked, and she knew that beneath that bothering moustache shone the old sweet smile. 'Why, Mabel, you keep staring at me so, that I begin to think you have forgotten me, and are trying in vain to ransack your memory for the faded image of my former personality.'

'Child of my love,' she answered, 'your face, it is true, is a little altered, and your figure still more so.'

'But *improved*, Mabel? Surely you will not refuse my vanity so very trifling a concession?'

'On the whole, I think you are *outwardly* improved,—but inwardly? Oh Caryl! if the alteration is similar *there*; if you have grown firmer, bolder, stronger, only to grow *harder* as well, I am sure I shall regret the image my heart keeps of you in days gone by.'

'Dear,' he answered tenderly, 'for *you* I can never grow "hard;" to love like ours, time can only bring a closer and kindlier union.'

'And only to *ours*, Caryl? Has your heart closed, *can* it close *finally* against *any* one it ever cherished?'

He seemed to waver for a moment, and turned his eyes away, but conquering the weakness, he bent them steadily on hers, and answered gravely:

'I understand, Mabel; you would force me to speak when I would gladly have kept *unbroken* silence. Have out your say. I know you will never let me rest till you have unburthened your mind of whatever engrosses it.'

'Only one word, then—are you *free*?'

'Free?' he repeated with some impatience —'free from what?'

'From any *newer* engagement—at least from any *newer* inclination?'

'I am perfectly free.'

'And you have *quite* broken the fetters that once held you; you can revisit the scene of your former hopes with scarcely a memory, still less a regret?'

'Mabel,' he answered sadly, 'you might have spared me this—there is no hope, however long dead and cold, that does not sometimes haunt the chambers of memory as a vague regret. But a resolute will can lay the phantom, when the regret is unworthy and the hope was vain.'

'And so you have ceased to love Margaret Fielding?'

'How can I continue to love what has proved incapable of understanding or returning affection?'

'But if she is *not* incapable—if your judgment of her should prove to have been too

hasty and severe, could you not then forgive her?'

'I have nothing to forgive, she cannot help her nature; I find it harder to forgive myself for having so mistaken it.'

'You no longer love her—will you say *that*?'

'I loved her once.'

'Caryl, you have often agreed with me that there is no *past tense* in love—to say that you loved her *once*, then, is to say that you love her still.'

'Be it so,' he replied coldly. 'I love her, as a man may love the wife who has betrayed or forsaken him, because around her are gathered all the tender associations of happiness and home, which she has trampled on or scattered to the winds. Is this love so sweet that you would plead for it? and not

more bitter, more desolating, than even hate would be?'

There was nothing very encouraging in this, so Miss Marston changed her tactics. After a moment's silence, she asked cheerfully:

'What do you think of Colin's *ménage*? Wasn't my match-making very successful there?'

'Why, you audacious little intrigante, you surely do not claim the merit of *that*? Helen was attached to Collingwood from a child, and he always meant to marry her sooner or later.'

'Yes, but his "later" might have been too late if *I* had not kept him up to it.'

'You had better not let Helen hear you say so.'

'She would not believe it; what *happy* wife could be persuaded that she owes her

treasure to anything but her own attractions; and Helen *is* happy, isn't she?'

'She seems perfectly so; but I fancy that the possession of a more recent treasure than Colin has no inconsiderable share in making her so happy; and you claim no merit *there*?'

'No,' said Mabel, 'not *directly*.' Then she abruptly enquired, 'Have you seen Mr. Fielding's grave?'

'I have not; where is he buried?'

'In Hartsknoll churchyard, under the great yew; you will see it when you go to church on Sunday.'

'Scarcely, since I return to town to-morrow.'

'Why are you in such a hurry? If you wish to avoid poor Margaret, you can do so without making all your friends pay the penalty of losing your society.'

'No doubt; why do you say "*poor* Mar-

garet," Mabel? Has any misfortune befallen Miss Fielding?'

'Do you call it no misfortune for so young a woman to be left orphaned on the world with no near relative, and scarcely any intimate friends?'

'She will not long be so bereft—she is young, handsome, and wealthy. From what I have heard of the nature of Mr. Fielding's protracted illness I should think that his death must have been a boon to his daughter rather than an irreparable affliction.'

'Caryl!' protested Queen Mab, excitedly, 'you have grown heartless! If such an affliction were to befall Sir Loys, is that the way in which you would regard it?'

'God forbid!' he answered, 'but Mr. Fielding never was to Margaret what my dear father has been to *me*.'

'You do not know what he was to her;

you do not know how inexpressibly weakness, dependence, suffering,—will endear the sufferer to any true woman's heart. More, you do not know—the worse for you—how, in such a heart, affections that seemed dormant will awaken and respond to that appeal, as the instinct of a mother's love will yearn to the first feeble stirring of her unborn child. But if, in your selfish resentment against Margaret, you had not withdrawn from any knowledge of, any sympathy with her trials, perhaps in witnessing them you would have learnt this.'

For some moments Caryl made no reply. Then he asked, in a low voice:

'Have I been selfish, Mabel? Miss Fielding has indeed the strongest claims on my sympathy, if—if it could be of any worth to her. But no! Margaret would scorn sympathy—she is strong. I do not doubt that

she would prove equal to any duty, however trying, and that she has not failed in that which she owed her father.'

'Yes, Margaret is strong, but there are duties—and hers was one—which demand *tenderness*, and can never be fulfilled by strength only. If you had seen Margaret as I have seen her, for three years, bearing so gently, so patiently, an ever-increasing burthen; if you had watched her health declining, her bloom fading, in her unremitting attendance on the varying caprices of a fretful invalid; if you knew as *I* know, how weeks and months passed by a young girl in the weary seclusion of a sick chamber, the chamber of an old man who is not even conscious of her self-devotion—how time thus passed will steal away the brightness and freshness from her etiolated youth, until all life stretches dim and colourless before

her—I think you would have felt with me, that she needed all the support and comfort she could have received from sympathy, even from the friends whom in her lighter hours she may have wronged.'

Did Caryl's lips tremble, as they once used to do, under the veil of that thick moustache? Mabel fancied they did. It was not mere fancy, that in the eyes he turned wistfully upon her there shone all the softness of old.

'Has Margaret's bloom faded?' he asked. 'Is she no longer the bright fresh maiden I knew her? I cannot realise such a change.'

'You may realise it in a few moments, if you choose, for she will be here directly.'

Caryl drew suddenly back, and looked such mute reproach at his friend as a trapped animal can look at its ensnarer.

'Don't be angry, Caryl, you have time to escape. Margaret only came back yesterday,

and knows nothing of your visit, and will know nothing of it till you are gone.'

'When is she to be here?'

Mabel glanced at the clock.

'I expected her before now, but something has detained her. She will probably not come at all to-day.'

Mr. Fernleigh ought, in consistency, to have looked much relieved at this — but somehow, he didn't.

'She is changed, you say?—pale and faded? My poor Margaret!'

'*Your* Margaret? She is no longer *your* Margaret; you cast her from you, you stood aloof from her in her affliction—in her loneliness; you have no right even to pity a sorrow which you gave up your right to soothe.'

'She loved her father, then? Oh! if she could have loved *me*!'

'So she did love you, but you would not bear with her; because your gem needed the hand of the lapidary to give it its fullest lustre, you would have cast it beneath the swine's feet! Yet—oh, Caryl! do we give to Him who may claim our best and worthiest, such love,—*even* such,—as we scorn from our fellow-men?'

Caryl sighed, and took up his hat to depart. Much chance *he* had of escaping from the toils of the little Queen of Spells!

'You don't care to see her, even at a distance, Car'l?'

'I should dearly like to see her, if I could see her without being seen; but I cannot meet her, at least not *yet*.'

'You may see her, if you will, without her knowing that you are near her.'

The young man looked up wistfully.

'See, Car'l,' continued the 'little intri-

gante,' who now really deserved the name, 'go into my library, it's quite dark there, we can't see into it. You can observe Margaret at your leisure there, and you can come out when she's gone away.'

Miss Marston's 'library,' be it explained, was only the doorless and windowless recess, in which she kept all her books and MSS., nearly as big as the parlour itself, but circumscribed by bookshelves on all three sides. Mr. Fernleigh, however, demurred to the proposal.

'Impossible, Mabel! if she were to surprise me there?'

'Trust *me*, to guard against that; only you mustn't cough, or sneeze, or throw the books down.'

'*Quite* impossible, I cannot play the eavesdropper?

'But we have no secrets. I'll lead the

conversation *entirely* to the weather, and I'll take her upstairs in five minutes.'

'I would do much, Mabel, for one more, one *last* look at Margaret—to hear her voice once more; but I cannot do this.'

'Then!' said Mabel, in a thrilling whisper of exultation, 'then you must meet her face to face; for I hear her at the door and I'm going to let her in.'

CHAPTER XVI.

RAT-IFIED.

I have you fast in my fortress,
And will not let you depart,
But put you down into the dungeon
In the round-tower of my heart.

LONGFELLOW.

How it happened, Mr. Fernleigh always declared, in Aunt Flo's phraseology, that he 'hadn't an idea!' but certainly, when Miss Marston ushered her guest into the parlour the room was to all appearance empty. I shall not attempt to justify Mabel's conduct on this occasion; it was most indelicate, most unladylike, thus to force on Caryl

the alternative of meeting a lady whom he wished to avoid, or of lurking in a corner whence he could overhear every word she said. Still perhaps the last alternative could have been evaded. He *might* have stopped his ears, mightn't he? You would have done so, in his place? That's right. Of course you would; so did he—*possibly*!

'Now, Margaret, my sweet,' said the little traitress, 'you will stop and have tea with me? Georgie will be in directly, and we'll have a cosy evening.'

The unsuspecting visitor cheerfully assented to this proposal. Poor girl! her lonely home at the Manor House offered no great temptation to her to return to it! Mabel drew her to a seat fronting 'the library,' where the light from the casement fell full upon her face and form, and proceeded to divest her of her hat and cloak.

Miss Fielding was clad in the deepest mourning, and the close-fitting black dress displayed the outlines of a form fuller and more womanly than when we first saw her; but its light girlish grace and buoyancy was exchanged for a drooping habit, as of one who has been long accustomed to bend over a sick man's pillow. The dun gold of her hair still waved and rippled over her clear forehead, but in her eyes and round her mouth there was a tremulous shadow. It was not so much *gloom* as vanished light. Her cheek, too, was slightly hollow, and the white hands she lifted to smooth her braids were transparently thin and wasted. She smiled up at Mabel as she hung over her, and that acute little person instantly discerned a re-awakened sadness in the melancholy smile.

'My darling,' she said, 'has anything

vexed you?—you look so sorrowful to-day.'

'Only that I have had a letter from my friends at Rome urging me to join them immediately, on their way to Rome. I suppose I shall have to go: but it is very painful to me to leave dear Hartsknoll and you, who have been so good to me—and poor papa: it is like parting afresh with *him*.' And Margaret's voice faltered.

'Now, Margaret, I won't have that. It's morbid. What is a Christian's faith good for if it cannot raise him above such unmeaning sentimentality? None who look up to a risen Christ but must look *away* from Him, while they hang droopingly over the grave of those who are with Him. It is a meeting, and not a parting, that will ever again take place between your dead and you.'

'I know,' she answered; 'but, dear Mabel, you are "hard," as you used to call me, if you cannot make some allowance for the weakness of a recent sorrow.'

'No, darling,' returned Mabel, fondly; 'I will indulge no weakness in you, because I know you are strong enough to conquer where others yield.'

'Oh!' she said, 'do not commend my strength; if you knew how weak I feel myself, how unable to face the cold world to which I am going forth alone!'

'That is mere physical weakness, my child, it will wear off soon; nothing will cure it sooner than a complete change of scene and associations; it is good for you to leave Hartsknoll.'

'Yes, of course it will wear off in time; but the suffering that must be borne first!' and she shivered.

'But you will not long be alone; you are young, pretty, and — rich. Friends and lovers will soon flock round you, and shut out, perhaps even the memory of these last sorrowful years.'

'If I believed *that*,' said Margaret, 'I would never go away; if I believed that I could unlearn all that those sad years have taught me!'

'It does not follow because we have forgotten the taste of a bitter medicine that therefore it was an ineffectual remedy.'

Margaret was silent for a moment; then she looked up suddenly, and said:

'Mabel, I would rather suffer all my days than live to forget Caryl Fernleigh!'

The fairy queen laughed a silvery mocking laugh.

'All girls talk like that when they are in love!'

Miss Fielding flushed up instantly with her old vivacity, and looked once more like the Margaret of former days.

'I am *not* in love! In love! I hate the foolish, *banale*, frivolous phrase. Oh! I am unworthy to say *how* I love Caryl, but I will always love him with —— What's that?'

'Only a book fell down,—how nervous you are, dear; but, Margaret, I do not sympathise in your feeling for Caryl. I do not think he is worthy of your remembrance; it is his severity, his unforgivingness, that has left you, as you say, to face the world alone.'

'He was right to be severe; he was right to be unforgiving; the woman who could

receive such love as his, to requite it with base suspicion, such a woman he rightly judged to be unworthy of it. Yet, if he had known how dear he was to me, amid all my folly and pride; if he could know how often since that bitter parting I have pined for the tenderness that would have been such a support to me in my long trial, and how I have wished that any tears of mine could have atoned for the pain I so often caused him, surely, if he could know this, he would forgive?'

Margaret's face was buried in her hands, and Mabel shot an imploring glance in the direction of 'the library,' but there was no movement there. So she spoke quite sternly:

'No, Margaret, he might know all this, and yet he would not forgive; for Caryl has *no heart*!'

'He is strangely changed, then.'

'He *is* changed; these gentle-seeming natures sometimes harden so! Do you know, Margaret, he has been at Fernleigh this week, and has gone away again' (Oh, the little story-teller!) 'without leaving one word for you?'

Margaret must have started very violently, for by 'the laws of vibration,' I suppose, a whole shelf of books rattled down. She withdrew her hands from her face and glanced up eagerly.

'He has been here?—you have seen him? Oh! tell me every word about him.'

'No, my love, I will tell you nothing. I will not encourage this weak yearning for a man who has no longer any thought of you.'

'I will not accept your reproof, Mabel; *I* forfeited Caryl's affection, but he has never

lost his right to *mine*. Good gracious! there's something moving in the closet!

'It's only Robert Browning among the books. Well, if *you* do not resent Caryl's unkindness, *I* resent it for you. I will not speak of him to you.'

'Oh, *do*, dear Mabel! I never hear his name now. I have such a heart-hunger to hear of him. Is he well?—is he happy?'

'He is quite as well as he deserves to be,' answered Queen Mab, sulkily; 'and a great deal happier. Could you bear to hear that he is going to be married?'

'I think I could; why not? For perhaps when he is *very* happy he will be able to forgive me. *Is* he going to be married, Mabel?'

'Not that I know; but he's equal to anything. I'm disappointed in Caryl; I won't talk any more about him; I'll go and get

tea ready. That hateful Georgie spends half her time careering to the Park, to admire Helen's wizened *amber* baby.'

'Mabel! I'm sure there's something black moving in the closet; I saw it just now.'

'Oh yes, it's only a rat.'

'Oh, dear Miss Marston, do please fetch the cat; I am so frightened at rats.'

'It can't get at you, dear; there's a—a *stone wall* between you and it.'

'A stone wall?' echoed Margaret astonished. 'Oh, you mean that it is outside.'

'Yes, it is outside, where it deserves to be—outside in cold isolation, shut out for ever from the loving warmth of a happy domestic hearth. Serve it right, the nasty cruel beast!'

At another time Margaret would have laughed at the vehemence of this tirade

against what 'the Gorgon' alliteratively styled 'them rotted rats;' but now she scarcely heard it. As Mabel passed the recess, I am ashamed to record that she relieved her irritated feelings, in school-girl fashion, by 'making a face' at its occupant; but it was thrown away. Mr. Fernleigh stood withdrawn into the farthest corner, his arm on the book-shelf, his head bowed upon his arm. Queen Mab turned round when she reached the door.

'You don't mind my leaving you alone for a few moments, Margaret?'

'Oh, no,' she replied, 'I am always alone.' But as Mabel flitted from the room, Margaret was moved by the unconscious pathos of her own words; and dropping her head upon the table she burst into sudden tears, sobbing low: 'Ever alone! Oh, come back! my lost Caryl! come back to me!'

That rat again! or was it Puss—in Boots? Margaret's quick ear recognised the step; her quick woman's wit instantly divined Miss Marston's most unjustifiable stratagem. She checked her sobs to listen; but she did not look up. Perhaps she reflected that her eyes were certainly swollen, that her nose was probably red. Still, hard as Miss Marston had declared Caryl's bosom to be, it was doubtless softer than the oak table, for she made no determined resistance when he bent over her, and drawing her towards him in an embrace close and warm enough to have met with even Collingwood's approval, whispered:

'If you *must* weep, my Margaret, henceforth weep only *here*.'

* * * * *

Whether the depository for Margaret's tears indicated by Mr. Fernleigh was less

convenient for the purpose than he supposed, I cannot say; but I am sure very few were shed there. I could easily reckon up the occasions on which she ever cried within the last five years! She cried, but it was with laughter, when Aunt Flo told her one day that the *felon*, Robert Browning, had been hanged by the new gamekeeper—'who knew not Joseph'—for poaching; but was discovered and cut down in time by the infuriated Gorgon. She cried for terror over Helen's yellow infant when it was once very ill with the st—— Well, well, the *tooth*ache. She wept later, for very joy, over a baby of her own—not yellow, but rosy pink—which Mabel declared to be an *elongated* cherub—without the anachronism of a nose! and on certain anniversaries, which were not *all* sorrowful, some tender tears would fall silently on the unadorned

tablet of a recent grave. But she had never again to weep for the loss of Caryl's love; nor did either of them so much as heave a single sigh for the loss of Mr. Morton's 'millions.'

THE END.

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